Asta and the Barbarians

Becca Fox

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

On the day the Holgarians attack her town, twenty-year-old Asta is blessed by a warrior god and is empowered with the heightened senses and unnatural healing abilities these foreign invaders possess. Grief-stricken and paralyzed by terror, she's hauled onto the conquering general's ship and taken to the island of Holger across the sea. One year later, Asta graduates from warrior academy with honors and is chosen as one of the king's personal defenders. She will finally have the opportunity to kill the man who gave the general his orders, and avenge her family. She doesn't expect the king to be young or kind, or completely oblivious of what his men are doing overseas. He has been told peaceful negotiations are going well, and the natural resources and ambassadors from the mainland seem to support this report. But Asta knows better. Asta must find proof of the general's treachery and bring it before the king so that she can save unconquered provinces from meeting the same fate as her hometown. But the king's counselors suddenly start dying, and the king himself is hounded by foreign assassins. Revenge will have to wait if Asta's going to keep the king, the mainland's only hope, alive.

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Becca Fox
ASTA AND THE BARBARIANS

For my mom. Look! I finally wrote some historical fiction for you… Well, sort of.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Publishers and authors are always happy to exchange their book for an honest review. If you have obtained a copy of this book without purchase or from the publisher or author, please consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads, as reviews help authors market their work more effectively. Thank you.

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PART I
DIVINE INTERVENTION

Chapter One

General Halvar placed a hand on my shoulder as the ship pulled into the harbor. “Welcome home, Asta.”

I winced at his touch.

“Do you remember why I brought you here?” he asked.

I looked up at the land mass before us.

Holger, the Island of Spears. I knew only rumors about this country. Their warriors couldn’t be defeated in battle, their population was larger than any other nation, and their schools offered the best curriculums. I used to think of it as a massive piece of land floating in the middle of the ocean, with foreboding clouds constantly roiling above. I used to have such an active imagination.

The actual island was far smaller than I pictured. I could see the whole of it with a turn of my head. Food vendors along the pier called out to passersby, women shopped, children played and weaved around horse-drawn carriages. Laughter drew my gaze to a couple attempting to take a schooner out to open waters. Fishing ships heavily laden with full nets pulled in beside us. I could smell the dead fish from my place on the poop deck.

I swallowed the bile traveling up my throat. “I’ve been chosen for a special task.”

“That’s right.” The general finally released my shoulder and stepped around me. His mismatched eyes, one misty white and the other gleaming like liquid copper, bored into mine. “Are you ready?”

I cowered out of habit, but straightened when I realized what I was doing. “Yes, sir.”

A grin stretched the burned side of the general’s face. “Praise be to Dotharr.”

“Praise be to Dotharr,” I said.

“Shall we?”

I stared at the elbow he offered me for a moment, entertaining fantasies about grabbing it and tossing the general overboard. I forced myself to take the elbow and follow him across the main deck instead. He waited patiently while I lifted the skirt of my dress and stepped onto the gangplank. After two weeks of suffering in men’s clothing, I had been given a bath and a new dress this morning. It didn’t make up for what had been done to me, but I couldn’t help feeling slightly grateful. Suddenly, I was a lady again and not a prisoner. Letters along the ship’s hull caught my eye: *The Great Disaster*.

I remembered everything then with a sudden clarity that made me gasp. My family. My home in Kenshore. The raid. The fires. Being dragged, kicking and screaming, out of the ruins of my town and onto

this vessel. I tore my gaze from the hull and blinked away tears.

"Something wrong?" the general asked.

I swallowed hard. "I was simply admiring the ship from this new vantage point, sir."

The double-masted ship was painted red-brown, with cream-colored sails and a single red flag. A wooden carving of a scantily-clad woman with a devilish smile and an outstretched sword clung to the bow. The seamen scurried up the ratlines to secure the sails while the copper-eyed warriors clamored down the gangplank. I shied away from them as they passed.

The noises of the city and the light of the sun made my head pound. I kept my sensitive eyes half-lidded and fixed on the planks of wood that made up the pier. I had gotten into the habit of breathing through my mouth to avoid overwhelming my nose on the ship, but the open air helped minimize the potency of the different odors wafting toward me.

"Dotharr's blessings might seem even more burdensome the deeper into the city we go," General Halvar said. "But you'll learn to better control your abilities at Dotharr's Academy."

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

The last two men to disembark from the ship stopped beside us.

"Asta, you remember Tarben and Manning?" the general said, gesturing to each as he named them. "They will be your personal guards while I'm away."

"D-Do I need protecting, sir?"

General Halvar chuckled. "You're the first woman and outsider to be chosen by our Heavenly Master of Warriors. Until you've learned how to use your new abilities to properly defend yourself, you will most definitely need protecting. Come along now."

I pursed my lips. *Or you want to be sure I don't try to commit suicide again.*

An enormous carriage waited for us at the end of the dock. The driver leapt from his seat to open the door for the general.

Halvar helped me into the carriage before joining me. "To Dotharr's Academy."

One of my guards sat on my other side. The second sat with the driver up front. Then we were off. The air carried the scents of sweat, horse, earth, and smoke. I tugged the sleeve of my dress down over my palm and pressed it against my face, hoping the subtle perfumes the material had been washed with would dampen the intensity of everything else. The clopping of horse hooves, the shouts of vendors calling attention to their goods, the laughter of children chasing each other across the street, and even the grumblings of the men cleaning up after the horses assaulted me. If I tried to focus on any one detail, I

felt that my head would explode. I allowed myself to become lost in all the sensory information to spare myself a headache. It worked for the most part.

There was very little green here. We stopped at a crossroads and there was a small park to my left, but it was nothing compared to the forests of Kenshore. My chest ached with longing and grief. We whisked by structures of marble, brick, and bath stone. Everything was so fine here, so modern and clean, compared to my home. General Halvar pointed out historical landmarks and spoke about them at length, as if giving me a tour. I nodded a lot, but hardly lifted my gaze from my shoes.

At last, the carriage stopped. The general climbed out and then turned to help me. I took in the grouping of buildings that was Dotharr's Academy. It had high cement walls, with block letters and numbers along the top of each building, cobblestone walkways, and a fountain. Groups of young men walked around, journeying to their classes. Armed guards were posted along the walls.

I gripped the general's hand and stepped down.

We walked to the main office where we were heartily greeted by the staff members working there. An errand man, a tall, lean gentleman with spectacles and dark hair pulled back into a ponytail, informed us that the director was overseeing a class somewhere on the grounds. He escorted us out of the building, across the square, and to a coliseum built around a sand pit. It was small as far as coliseums went; it seated two hundred, perhaps three hundred people. Two students were currently in a grappling match while the director and the rest of the class watched.

General Halvar didn't need to wait for anyone, it seemed. The errand man walked right up to the director and announced the general's presence.

"All right, enough!" the director shouted.

The two fighting stepped away from each other and looked up, chests heaving. A sea of rust-colored eyes turned to the director. I cringed.

"Warriors, we have a special visitor." The director held a hand out to us newcomers, and smiled. "General Halvar, Defender of the Rock."

The coliseum echoed with cheers and applause. The general walked out from the shelter of the entranceway, smiling at the young men around him. He was their hero. It made my stomach turn.

The general raised a hand for quiet and the shouts faded. "While conducting negotiations across the sea, I came across a miracle; an outsider with Dotharr's mark. The people of Kenshore didn't know whom they had ostracized. They considered copper eyes to be a curse

from evil spirits. I couldn't stand idly by and allow a potential warrior to live a life of poverty and banishment. So I took a respite from the mainland to deliver this new warrior myself." He gave my guards a look over his shoulder.

I was shoved forward, beside General Halvar. The director took a step back in surprise. A new kind of silence took hold of the men in the coliseum.

One of them rose and pointed accusingly. "Blasphemy! Dotharr would never choose a *woman*."

"Three lashings for your disrespect," the director shouted back. "Sit down before I make it five, Viggo."

One of the young man's peers gripped his elbow and yanked him back down to his seat.

"This is not a woman, gentlemen," the general said. "This is a fellow warrior, blessed by Dotharr, possessing the same talents as any of you."

The statement was met with silence.

I found Viggo's face among the masses. He was olive skinned, no doubt from the many hours he spent training in the sun. His brown hair was cropped short. His copper eyes were narrowed at me. When standing, he had been tall and burly. Even while slouching now, he seemed taller than the young man sitting next to him. The friend who had pulled him back down to his seat was speaking urgently, but Viggo didn't seem to be listening. Already, he hated me. As I looked into the faces of these warriors-in-training, I saw many more frowns of disgust. Viggo had just been the only one brave enough to speak his mind.

The general turned to the director. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to give Dotharr's Miracle a tour of your fine establishment before I go, Endre."

The director bowed his head. "Do as you wish, sir."

The general smiled in thanks and led me out of the coliseum. Turning his head slightly, he said, "Errand man."

"Bode, sir," the man said, hurrying to keep up with us.

"Would you be so kind as to prepare a room for Asta, produce a beginner's weekly schedule, and procure the necessary feminine products she will need during her stay?"

Bode shot me an uncomfortable glance. "Yes, sir. I'll fetch a room key and meet you in the living quarters."

"Good man," the general said before Bode left us. "That over there is the Feasting Hall, Asta. Breakfast is served at five, lunch at twelve, and dinner at six. You will wake up on time or you won't eat."

My head bobbed without needing permission from my brain.

"You will be in your designated classes by the appropriate times

or you will face the whipping post." The general gestured to the post located before the fountain.

My eyes were drawn to it. Where I came from it was an instrument of torture, a punishment reserved only for the worst offenders. Apparently, it was not so here.

"As you know, Dotharr's anointed heal quicker than the average man."

I grimaced despite myself.

He glanced at me, fighting a smirk. "But that doesn't mean we are incapable of feeling pain. The whipping post, although barbaric, guarantees the lesson is learned and the wrongdoer is permanently discouraged from committing the same crime again. They won't spare you because you are a woman, Asta. Nor should they. You need to learn, same as the rest. But I expect you'll never have to be so punished."

Goosebumps spread across my skin. I rubbed my arms in a useless attempt to get rid of the residual pain I felt.

The general ran a hand through his close-cropped black hair and continued. "Director Endre is very strict about the bedtime here. All lights must be out by eight sharp. By now I'm sure you've noticed there is a security team patrolling the grounds."

I found three of these men marching across the square. I refrained from glancing at the only exit. "Yes, sir."

"They, like your guards, are strictly here for your protection. They are some of the best graduates to have left this academy. No one and nothing can escape their notice."

In other words, "*Don't bother trying to run away, Asta*."

We rounded a two-story building and entered through glass doors.

"These are the living quarters," the general continued. "You'll find nothing but the essentials here. The academy prides itself on rejecting luxury and teaching its students to live a simple, structured life that is free of unnecessary attachments. If you can't contain your hair during your classes, consult the barber in the next building. I'm sure he'll be happy to help rid you of it."

I defensively clutched my braid.

We walked up several flights of stairs and found Bode waiting beside Room 310. He unlocked the door and pushed it open to reveal a small room. There was a single bed, a chest of two drawers, and a writing desk. There was also a window overlooking the square and whipping post. Three sets of folded clothes sat on the edge of the bed along with two pairs of shoes.

Bode waved a hand at the bed. "We have provided you with training clothes, lounging clothes, and a nightshirt. The jerkin,

trousers, and boots are to be worn during training. I trust you can figure out what to do with the rest. Laundry is done every night after dinner. Your training clothes are to be dropped through the chutes located in the washrooms. They will be washed, folded, and left outside your room in the morning." He turned to my guards. "The room beside this one will be shared by the two of you. I imagine there will only ever be one person sleeping at a time. The same rules apply."

The guards nodded.

"And here is your weekly schedule along with a map of the grounds." He handed me several folded pieces of parchment. "You are expected to memorize them. We can't afford to babysit you."

I accepted the pages with a murmured "Thank you." He frowned down his nose at me and excused himself to attend to other matters. I glumly cast my eyes about the room. Catching my reflection in the window, I shuddered at the copper eyes that stared back at me.

"Come, gentlemen," General Halvar said, watching me intently. "Give the girl a moment of privacy to absorb all that has happened."

My guards shuffled down the hall and out of sight without complaint.

I twisted the pages in my hands, avoiding the general's gaze and my new harsh reflection.

Halvar clasped his hands behind his back. "You will do well here."

It wasn't meant to be a reassuring statement. It was a command. I had already been warned of the consequences of disobedience.

I swallowed hard. "Yes, sir."

"You will advance until you impress your instructors," he said as he stepped forward. "You will be nominated as a candidate for King's Defender."

My muscles grew tense. My lungs grew tight. I didn't want him to come any closer but closer he came, until his breath fanned over my face.

He leaned down to meet my eyes. "You will serve the king to the best of your ability. You will become his greatest, most loyal guard. It's the only reason you're still alive."

"I understand," I croaked.

The general stepped back. "I will return in a year's time to witness your graduation. It shouldn't take you longer than that to achieve your goal."

"Safe voyage, sir."

He smiled. "Until we meet again, Asta of Holger."

I waited until I couldn't hear his boots slapping against the floor. Then I eased the door shut, leaned against the rough wood and laughed. It sounded hysterical, almost maniacal, even to my own ears.

I clapped a hand over my mouth then, suddenly overwhelmed with grief. Because I wasn't free. I would never be free of him.

Sliding down the length of the door, I sobbed as quietly as I could manage. The events of the last few weeks washed over me with their terror and grisliness. I allowed myself to mourn my parents, my sister, my fiancé, my friends, the servants who had so diligently cared for me, the quaint little town I had once hated, and the naïve, self-centered child I had once been.

Chapter Two

They came for me at dusk. I hadn't attended the beginners' classes as I was instructed. I had been warned of the consequences. Now, they were going to deliver. I had cried so much that day. I didn't have the strength to be afraid.

My guards watched the two members of the academy's security team escort me down the hall. Heads poked out of the rooms. Soon we had a group of followers, students anxious to witness the first whipping of the general's precious miracle.

Down the stairs, out of the building, across the square, to the whipping post we went. They chained my hands to the post and retreated. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the young warriors gather. Some cheered. Some sneered insults my way. Viggo stood at the front and smirked, arms crossed. And some simply peeked out of their bedroom windows. I recognized the sensible friend of that damned Viggo, watching from a second-story window. He was lean but strong, with a bushel of curly black hair. He leaned forward with his palms against his writing desk and looked down at me, brow furrowed in anxiety.

The director walked into my line of sight, dragging a cat-of-nine-tails behind him. Nails, bits of broken glass, jagged blades, and fish hooks had been attached to the ends of each tail. I stared at the thick splintery post before me and braced myself. There was a crack and then I was struck. The impact sent me to my knees. Countless bites of pain sank into my flesh. I grunted but didn't cry out. Shutting my eyes, I leaned my forehead against the wood and took a deep breath. Then the director jerked the whip back. The tearing of clothing, skin, and muscle was audible. The pain was excruciating. I screamed loud enough to sear my throat. Blood poured down my backside and splashed against my calves.

It was not so dissimilar from the blood that ran while the general tortured me. Instead of imagining I was in a different place as I did back then, I allowed the pain to rob me of my will to live.

There was a second crack of the whip. Now that my nerves were exposed, the sharp ends sank in and took hold. I couldn't breathe. The director tugged three times before the whip came free. I trembled and let out a sob. The shouts and laughter of the spectators were blotted out by my heartbeat, pounding loudly in my sensitive ears. My vision began to fade.

The third time those tails bit into my flesh, a sharp piece of something embedded itself at the nape of my neck. When the whip was pulled back, I felt the piece scrape against bone. I leaned heavily

against the post, the splinters biting into my face. It didn't matter. My back…

I'm coming, Mother, Father, Sylvi…

But death didn't come. The whip didn't strike a fourth time. The director shouted at the crowd to go back inside. My guards were given permission to unchain me. They carried me to my room and tossed me onto the bed, jarring every bone in my back. I pressed my face into the pillow and screamed.

"Let that be a lesson to you," one of my guards said over my yells. "The number of lashes will increase if you decide to skip your classes a second time—and don't think we've forgotten to tell the director about your death wish. He has half of the security team watching this building, your window especially."

The door slammed shut and I was left to bleed alone.

"*Father," I said. "I'm sorry*."

My father seethed. "Sorry? The groundskeeper caught you in the cemetery with the stable boy, and you're sorry*?"*

I rolled my eyes. "It was just a dare. Nothing happened."

"You know it hasn't been easy to arrange a suitable marriage for you," my father growled as he paced the length of his study. "And now that I've finally found an honorable man who is willing to take you…" He rounded on me, dark eyes narrowed. "Do you think Kustaav will still want you after this story gets out?"

I leapt from the chair. "I don't care if Kustaav still wants me! I'm not property to be signed and shaken hands over. I should have an opinion as to who I spend the rest of my life with."

My father rose to his full height. "Your mother was married to me on her father's command. Your friend Irma was married to that blacksmith one town over. Your sister is to be married to Torsten in three weeks. Every woman in this county marries who their fathers choose. What is so special about you that you alone are allowed an opinion in this matter?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but he continued before I could reply.

"Is it because your foolish father overlooked tradition and allowed you to attend school after the age of sixteen? Is it because your father looked the other way when you secretly began taking fencing lessons? Could it be that, by ignoring your lack of propriety, I made you believe you would be exempt from every *rule of society?" My father snorted. "Well, I'm sorry but you are gravely mistaken."*

I clenched my jaw when my world grew misty.

My father ran a hand through his thinning hair and took a deep breath. "I'm going to speak to the stable boy tomorrow. He will no longer be a member of our household staff. He is never to talk to you again and you are never to seek him out."

“His name is Fiske,” I said. “And he’s my friend.”

“I will smother any rumors that spread because of your thoughtlessness and beg Kustaav to take you,” my father said as if I hadn’t spoken. “You will personally apologize and assure him that you are still a virgin. You two will be married by next spring and you will no longer be my burden.”

I reared back as if I’d been slapped. “Is that all I am to you? A burden?”

The church bells tolled. My innards tightened. My father walked around his desk, eyes dark with worry. He yanked the curtains of the window aside and looked out.

The study door burst open to reveal Sylvi and my mother.

“It’s happened, Canute,” my mother said, her voice choked by fear. “Heaven help us!”

My father ambled toward them. “You know the plan. Pack only the essentials and head for the capitol.” My mother and sister made way for him to pass. He fetched the crossbow from its hooks on the wall and turned to give us a grim look. “Ride hard.”

Mother threw her arms around him. “Take care of yourself!”

“I will. I love you, Aulin.” He gave Sylvi a kiss on the forehead. “Be strong and take care of your mother.”

“Yes, Father,” she whimpered.

He turned to me but I refused to meet his gaze. “We will *meet again.” Then he was gone.*

* * *

My mother sobbed in the seat across from mine, red-brown curls bouncing over her shoulder slightly with every hiccup. Sylvi patted her back and murmured that Father would be all right. I leaned against the carriage’s small window, hoping to catch a glimpse of our home. I could hear the screams of panic as we thundered down the street. Our coachmen shouted at the horses. My town… I wanted to look away, but all I could do was gawk. Kenshore was being pillaged and burned. My people fled, taking only what they could carry with them. Some galloped beside us on horses. Some clutched their children to their chests and ran. And still the barbarian raiders gained on them.

The men of our town had been training since word of the crusade reached us five years ago. Traps had been set, weapons had been distributed, plans had been made. How were these foreign warriors already running rampant through our streets? Could it be that the rumors of their invincibility were true? Buildings burned. Swords sliced the air. Men were slaughtered in the streets. Women were dragged by their hair behind houses

and into dark corners. Children were cut down where they stood without hesitation. I slapped a hand over my mouth to keep from vomiting.

Something struck the side of our carriage. The door I leaned against was thrown open and I was ejected into the horde of people with a shout.

Men with eyes that glowed like liquid copper surrounded me when I woke. Men dressed in strange, form-fitting armor and carrying all manner of sharp weapons. I scrambled to my feet, tripping on the frayed trim of my dress and hastily brushing the hair out of my face. Their looks of hunger and vicious glee were replaced by shock and surprise.

"Gosta," one murmured to his neighbor. "Look at her eyes."

"You can still have her, Gosta," another jeered. "The general need not know."

My heart hammered painfully against my ribs. Were brown eyes special on their island? Could my eyes somehow save me?

The one called Gosta grimaced in disappointment. "The general always knows. Grab her."

"It's called medicine," said a sarcastic voice from the other side of my door. "It will help dull the pain. It might even help her heal faster. I'm sure my father wants her in class as soon as possible. How do you think he'll react when he hears you turned me away?"

"She'll heal quickly enough," one of my guards grunted. "She doesn't need your medicine."

"And if she has broken bones? If there has been lasting damage done to her spine? If an infection has spread? We're impervious to most illnesses, but we aren't completely immune. A physician has never set foot on the academy grounds. My father isn't going to call one now, not even for Dotharr's Miracle. I've helped numerous other warriors-in-training who have faced the whipping post. I'm the closest thing to a doctor she's ever going to see."

There was a moment of silence while the guards deliberated.

"The director already gave us permission," another voice muttered.

The door opened.

I bolted upright in bed only to crumple back against the bloody sheets with a cry of agony.

Viggo and his sensible friend entered the room. I didn't have the energy to be surprised, much less speak.

"I was handling it," the young man whose name I didn't know said under his breath.

"You were taking too long," Viggo retorted.

I writhed in pain for a moment and curled up in a ball. "Go away."

“As you wish,” Viggo said, stepping back.

His friend gave him a look of disapproval before smiling at me. “My name is Bryn. I’m an aspiring doctor, despite my glowing eyes. I can help you if you let me.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I sobbed. “I just want to die.”

Viggo rolled his eyes, but received an elbow to the gut before he could comment.

“Nobody is dying,” Bryn said. “At least not today.”

“It *reeks* in here,” Viggo grumbled. He stalked over to the window and yanked it open.

Bryn sat beside me on the bed and opened his satchel. “If it bothers you so much, why don’t you track down someone from Housekeeping and request some fresh bed sheets?”

“I’m not your errand boy!” Viggo snapped.

Bryn produced a rag, then continued rummaging through his bag. “Or you can stay here and breathe in the lovely smell of blood and oozing wounds. Do what you wish.”

Viggo simmered while Bryn selected a bottle and set his satchel aside. The aspiring doctor poured green liquid from the bottle over the rag before turning to me. “I need you to turn onto your stomach if you’re able.”

“It hurts to move,” I said with a sniffle.

Viggo threw his hands in the air and marched out of the room, grumbling under his breath.

“I’ll do what I can from this angle then,” Bryn said, then gently pressed the damp rag into my shoulder.

I bit my lips but still let out a whimper.

“I’m sorry. This will sting initially, but it will kick in after a few minutes.”

I shut my eyes and let the darkness take me.

I woke to an exasperated grunt. “You think your father will let you become a doctor after all our hard work?”

“All of *my* hard work, you mean?” It sounded as if Bryn were fighting a smile.

“Yes, of course, *your* hard work. You could graduate in six months’ time if you did as you were told and dedicated yourself to your courses. Is that not what you want? To be rid of this place?” Viggo asked.

There was no more pain. I opened my eyes to find myself facing the legs of my writing desk. I lay on my stomach on the floor, in nothing but my undergarments. My cheek was pressed against a blanket. Bryn worked somewhere behind me. I could feel the warmth of him against my sensitive back.

“I want the freedom to make my own future.” A substance of some kind crinkled like paper pinched or rubbed between two fingers. Something clinked against glass. Maybe a spoon stirring a liquid mixture in a bottle? “Once the stamp of this academy is added to my record, the only occupation I will ever be considered for is that of a soldier,” Bryn continued. “I can’t be admitted into Ishem’s School of Science until my father expels me.”

“So the past month of training was for nothing?”

“It appears that way, yes.”

Viggo sighed in frustration, but there was sadness in his voice when he spoke. “Why are you so intent on ending our friendship?”

Bryn laughed. “Your friendship I will keep until death, but this isn’t my calling. I know where I truly belong.”

“Blasphemer,” Viggo said, although the insult sounded half-hearted.

“Puritan,” Bryn shot back.

Viggo chuckled, but it was cut off. “What was Dotharr thinking, sending a woman to the general? Warriors are always men.”

Liquid was poured out of something. I could hear the rush of water as it slid through a funnel. Then the squishing of wet fabric and the dripping of excess water. The smell of herbs drifted through the air. “Now who is the blasphemer? Maybe that’s why Dotharr chose her. The best warrior is the one no one expects.”

Viggo scoffed. “She won’t last three days here.”

“I’ll take that bet,” Bryn said. “A day on the grounds and she’s already broken the rules. She has more spirit than you give her credit for.”

“Says the man tending so dutifully to her wounds,” Viggo said. “Having spirit does *not* mean she’s capable of completing the courses.”

“We’ll see.” A shuffle of movement, a shadow on the floor beside me, drawing near.

I lifted my head and turned to face him.

“Hello,” he said, perking up in surprise. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m awake.”

“Yes,” he said with a nod. “That’s something. You slept through the night and most of today. Your wounds have sealed. You should be developing scabs by tomorrow evening.”

“Why did you help me?” I asked. “I have nothing to give in return. You must have known that.”

Bryn smiled softly. “A very wise woman once said, ‘A world without kindness is a dark and hopeless place.’ And that isn’t the kind of world I wish to live in.”

My eyes stung with the coming of new tears.

Viggo rolled his eyes and turned to leave. “I’ll see you at dinner,

Bryn."

"Until then," Bryn said over his shoulder. His glowing eyes fell on my face again. "What's your name?"

"Asta."

"I would like to hear your story, if you are willing and able to tell it, Asta."

I rubbed my face against the blanket. "You won't like it."

"We are rarely fond of the truth," Bryn said with a shrug. "Tell me anyway."

Chapter Three

I didn't tell him everything. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to. I opted for a summary of the attack on Kenshore and concluded with my arrival on Holger.

Bryn ran a hand over his face and left it over his mouth, as if he were suddenly feeling sick. "Asta, I…" He let his hand drop at last. "I don't know what to say."

"There's nothing to say," I said numbly. "My family is dead. My town is destroyed. My life is over."

"That story is significantly different than the one General Halvar told."

Disappointment wove around my throat like a noose. Why did I think this stranger would believe me over the renowned and respected Defender of the Rock? I shook my head and attempted to sit up. "Believe what you want. You asked for my story so I gave it."

Bryn hastily looked away when my tattered undershirt threatened to expose my chest. I lay back down on my stomach, face burning.

He rose to rifle through the chest of drawers. Once he'd found a shirt and some trousers, he blindly held them out to me. "Here."

"Thank you," I said, taking the garments from him.

He turned and stared at the door. "I don't believe you to be a liar. It's only… General Halvar and his militia were sent with the king's diplomats for security purposes only. They intervene if peaceful negotiations have failed and the representatives are in danger. Perhaps you don't know the whole story."

I eased out of my pantalets and stepped into the trousers. "My father was the mayor of our town. If General Halvar and those so-called diplomats had wanted to peacefully negotiate anything, they would have come to our border and asked for a meeting with my father. The only warning we received of their coming was the church bell tolling after the border guardsmen had already been assaulted. General Halvar and his men attacked my town without reason, murdered the men, women, and children who lived there, and proceeded to burn everything to the ground. What more is there to know?"

Bryn shook his head. "I have no answers for you. All I know is what I've heard since the Quest for Resources began five years ago. Nothing has been reported to make me believe the general has any malicious intent."

I pulled the new shirt over my head, wincing at the tenderness of my back. "The general lies. The men who follow him are too terrified to expose him or are in league with him. It's the only explanation." I

glanced at the door and cursed. “I shouldn’t have said a word. If my guards overheard any of this—”

“I dismissed them for dinner. We’re the only ones not in the Feasting Hall right now.” Bryn peeked over his shoulder at me and then turned when he saw I was dressed properly. His long face was earnest. “If you truly don’t wish to be here, Asta, I can help you. I’m planning on running away from this place soon. You could come with me.”

“And go where? And do what?” Despair made my voice crack. “There’s no other place for me but here.”

“That’s not true. You could…” Bryn struggled to come up with a plausible plan for my future.

“You said so yourself,” I murmured. “The only occupation those of us with copper eyes will ever be considered for is that of a soldier. That’s all we’re good for on the island. And since the cat-of-nine-tails didn’t finish me off—”

His eyes bulged. “You really *did* want to die.”

“My guards didn’t get in the way, did they?” I said with a flash of anger. “But if I jumped out my window or tried to hang myself with my sheets, they’d overhear my movements through the walls and burst in to stop me. There’s nothing sharp in my room that I could use to quietly slit my wrists and go in peace either. And now that the director knows my intent, I’ll be watched by all the security guards, not just mine.”

Bryn’s face softened. “Death shouldn’t be wished by anyone who isn’t terribly old or terminally ill. It’s wrong.”

I looked away from his kind face and squeezed my hands into fists. *He can’t understand. He hasn’t lost what I have*.

“Find another reason to live,” Bryn urged. “There has to be some drive within you, something you still want or need.”

Suddenly, a new goal blossomed in my mind. A need that burned away the desire for death. I would excel in this hellish academy. I would be nominated for King’s Defender. I would become the greatest, most skilled warrior anyone on this damned island had ever seen. And when the general came for my graduation, I would slaughter him and his precious king.

Bryn’s jaw dropped when he registered the new light in my eyes. “You mean to kill the general, don’t you?”

“I’ll end this acursed crusade,” I said. “If I die in my pursuit, so be it. I’ll see justice served on those who’ve wronged me.”

His face wrinkled in sympathy. “I’m sorry for what has happened to you. Truly I am. But you can’t murder the general. It isn’t right.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting memories of knives biting my flesh, whips cracking against the back of my legs, and the general’s

cold, dead, mismatched eyes. “Nothing that has been done to me has been *right*.”

Bryn held up his hands, palms forward in a gesture of surrender. “I understand, but there’s another way. You could investigate, find proof of the general’s lies, expose him to the people.”

“Be merciful?” I scoffed. “Why?”

“Because repaying violence with violence makes you no better than your enemies.”

I sank onto the bed, suddenly weak. It sounded like something my father would say.

With a pang of guilt, I recalled our last conversation. I didn’t even say goodbye… *Did he think of me in the end? Did he know how much I loved and appreciated him?* I wiped my eyes and averted my gaze. “Thank you for taking care of me. I’m indebted to you.”

Bryn nodded and managed a smile. “I’ll remember that, should I ever need to ask a favor of you in the future.”

I tried not to be too anxious about his words. I couldn’t be afraid of every man I met simply because of what had happened to me on *The Great Disaster*. I eyed the vials of herbs, mixing spoons, pages of calculations, and empty bottles scattered across the floor. “So what’s all this?”

Bryn hastily shoved his pain-relieving supplies into his satchel. “Sorry about the mess. It’s the only way I can work.”

“Does your father allow you to leave the academy to buy your herbs?”

He sighed mournfully. “If only. I accidently discovered Bode’s illegal addiction. I vowed not to tell the authorities if he agreed to purchase whatever herbs I wanted. I make a list every week and give it to him before he goes to the marketplace for our food.”

“He did have a peculiar scent,” I recalled. “What do you do with the herbs?”

Bryn shrugged. “Experiments. I combine them with certain liquid medicines and use the mixture on my peers when they’re injured. With their consent and only after they promise to keep my secret, of course. I document my observations and replicate the successes in the hopes that they’ll impress the medical school recruiters.”

“Well, Dr. Bryn, whatever you used on my back most certainly works. I don’t feel any pain.”

He smiled. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“What does it mean? Your name.”

The smile slowly faded. “My full name, Brynjar, means warrior in armor.”

I blinked. “Oh…”

He waved a hand at me. “Yes, I know. It’s a ridiculous name.”

"Not at all. It'll be very fitting once you've graduated."

"My mother called me Behnam," Bryn said, his expression soft and nostalgic. "It means man of honor, but everyone who joins Dotharr's Academy is given a new name. Surely someone has told you that."

I'd like to see them try to take my name from me. It's all that remains of my homeland now. I set aside my fiery indignation. "Your father is the director and your best friend is a devout believer in Dotharr, and yet you want to go to medical school. It's curious."

Bryn sat beside me on the bed. "Not really. Women aren't allowed into Ishem's School of Science. As advanced as our educational system is, we still have a long way to go before men and women are allowed equal opportunities. My mother was an herbalist, the closest thing she could be to a doctor. She created her own remedies and sold them at her herb store." He looked down at his hands. "She was murdered roughly a month ago by a desperate man who couldn't pay for his medicine."

I leaned back in surprise. "That's awful. I'm so sorry."

Bryn shrugged and averted his gaze. "Yes, well, it made my father's dreams come true. Viggo and I hunted down my mother's killer and gained copper eyes as a result. My father had always hoped I would be chosen by Dotharr. He believed me being a warrior would bring him great honor. With my mother gone, there was no one to argue that being a doctor was just as honorable as being a soldier. He won't listen to me. My eyes have changed, so my future has been decided. And that is the end of the discussion."

"I don't know what to say," I murmured, but what I thought was, *At least your father is still alive*.

Bryn placed a hand over his growling stomach and gave me a sheepish smile. "On that cheerful note, what do you say we go to the Feasting Hall?"

I was given a tray with several strips of chicken breast, a pile of mashed potatoes, and a mound of broccoli.

Bryn was ecstatic. "Broccoli. Yes!"

"What is it usually?" I asked in horror. I'd never seen a man so pleased to see a vegetable before. Could there be something worse than broccoli served on a regular basis?

He made a sour face. "Cauliflower. Or boiled spinach."

I gagged. "I'm afraid to ask what they serve for lunch."

"Fish and rice," Bryn replied, leading me between rows of tables. "Although the vegetables in the rice vary."

I peeked into my mug. "Is it always water to drink?"

"We're allowed milk with our bread in the morning."

“I guess I should be thankful for that.” I caught sight of my guards eating at a nearby table. One scowled at me; the other curled his lip.

“Loyal companions you have there,” Bryn said with raised eyebrows and a teasing smile.

“They’re not here by choice, but they fear General Halvar too much to kill me quietly and return to their families.” I wasn’t blind to the looks we were receiving. Every member of the tables we passed followed us with their eyes, smirking, frowning, or scowling. I heard them murmuring under their breath.

“Whore.”

“Imposter.”

“Weakling.”

There wasn’t a single man among these warriors-in-training who would dare to stoop so low as to fantasize about me. Under different circumstances, I might have been insulted. Now, I was thankful. *Hopefully it means they’ll stay away from me*.

Viggo sat at a table toward the back of the hall with three others. They talked and laughed, so far the most boisterous group I’d seen. They fell silent as Bryn and I approached. I didn’t hide behind Bryn. They had seen me at my weakest at the whipping post. I wouldn’t be weak before them again. I forced myself to meet their disgusted and spiteful gazes.

“Good evening, men,” Bryn said cheerfully. “Can we join you?”

“You’re always welcome among us,” a bear of a man said with barely a glance in my direction. “The thing that follows you isn’t.”

“I can sit elsewhere,” I said.

Bryn ignored me and smiled at the speaker. “I’m sorry you feel that way, Asger. We’ll find somewhere else to eat.” He elbowed me and nodded toward an empty table farther down the aisle.

“Oh, sit down, Bryn!” Viggo said in exasperation. “You aren’t going into isolation for a girl.”

Asger and the other two were about to object, but one glare from Viggo made them clamp their mouths shut.

Viggo turned his glare on me before saying, “Sit.”

“I don’t need your charity. I don’t fear isolation.” I marched to the empty table, dropped my tray with a clatter, and sat. Scowling down at my food, I began forking mashed potatoes into my mouth. Footsteps approached, and I saw him sit beside me out of the corner of my eye. “You don’t need to protect me, Bryn. I’m not your charge. You can sit with your friends.”

“He knows,” Viggo said, making me jump in surprise. “He does what he does because he wants to. The only reason it isn’t him sitting here right now is because I asked for a moment alone with you.”

I looked over Viggo’s shoulder to see Bryn watching us anxiously

from afar.

Viggo leaned in, forcing me to lean back. “Bryn is a good man. He upset his father, and is facing scorn from his own friends *for you*: a stranger whose very presence in this academy is an affront to our religious beliefs and our way of life. It’s because of him that I’m tolerating you at all. So I suggest you refrain from ever speaking to him in anger or disrespect, or you’ll have me to reckon with.”

I wasn’t afraid of him. His love and respect for his friend were evident, but I was done cowering before men. I rose from my seat. “You’re right about your friend, but you’re wrong about me. Do you think I *chose* to come here? I never asked your Heavenly Master to change the color of my eyes.” Viggo jumped to his feet and opened his mouth to defend himself, but I continued before he could get a word out. “Because Dotharr needed some form of entertainment, I was dragged onto a ship, held against my will, beaten senseless by your beast of a general, and left at this damned academy to become a killer.” I rose to my full height to poke him in the chest. “If you think for one moment that I *want* to be here, you’re a fool.”

He opened his mouth a second time, but paused. We both glared at our audience until they returned to their food. I waved impatiently at my guards, who had risen from their table and begun to draw their weapons.

“If you expect an apology, you won’t get one,” Viggo hissed.

I scoffed. “If you expect me to be intimidated by you, I’m not.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

He spun on his heel and returned to his table. I dropped into my seat. Conversations eventually continued across the hall.

Bryn eased into the bench across from me. “I was prepared to intervene but, from the looks of things, you handled him well enough on your own.”

I refrained from snapping at him and simply murmured, “I don’t like bullies.”

“Good,” Bryn said, smiling. “Then the two of you should get along splendidly.”

Chapter Four

I bathed that night. Standing under the spigot, I shut my eyes to fully absorb the majesty of the hot water. I took my time scrubbing my scalp and body, then inspected my limbs for scars. Proof of the horrors I'd been forced to endure appeared in the form of faint white lines across my torso and thighs. I watched the water run over my feet in wonder. Those toes, now straight and manicured, had once sported torn nails and twisted joints. This healing ability I'd recently developed was truly amazing. Once rinsed, I shut off the water and reached for the towel I had hung on the hook just beyond the curtain. I grasped at empty air, then stuck my head out of the shower cubicle and cursed.

Four young men stood in a loose arch before my stall. The tallest one held my towel. He taunted me with it. "Looking for this?"

I scowled at them, despite the adrenaline making my heart race. "Animals! Where are my guards?"

"Unconscious," the tall one said. "An ambush of four against two? It was an easy fight."

"You will give me my towel, vermin," I growled.

He rolled his eyes. "Or what?"

I yanked on the curtain until it came loose and wrapped it around my body as best as I could. I pulled it tight and tucked the corner between my breasts. The curtain was only long enough to reach my knees, but at least the important parts were covered. "Or," I said, stepping out of the cubicle, "I will take it from you."

The other three jeered and whistled, ready for a show. The tall one laughed.

I put my fingers in the corners of my mouth and blew. All four clapped their hands over their ears, uttering shouts of pain and surprise. My own ears ached at the sound, enhanced by the washroom's acoustics, but I ignored it. I marched up to the tall one before he could recover and kicked him between the legs as hard as I could. He crumpled and vomited. I spun to face the other three. One recovered from his shock and charged at me. I threw an elbow across his chest and drove him back against the wall, screaming.

I let my fists fly before he could raise his hands to defend himself. My knuckles connected with his face over and over again. He flinched and screamed with every punch that landed. He tried to lift his arms to protect his head but I batted them away with one hand and continued assailing him with the other. Skin tore. Bones cracked. Blood ran. Still I kept punching him.

It felt good. The underlying rage and helplessness that had been

eating away at me all this time was finally released.

The young man slumped to the floor like a limp fish. His face was a mess. Someone grabbed me by the shoulder and spun me around. I used the momentum to whip my arm around, fingers curved. My nails left red, angry grooves on this young warrior's cheek. He staggered back. I shoved him as hard as I could. He fell with a crack. Curling in on himself, he gripped the sides of his head and groaned. Kicking him several times in the gut kept him down.

I turned to glare at my last would-be attacker. He dashed out of the room. I took a moment to steady my breathing, panting like an enraged bull, looking down at my bloody fists. My knuckles were split in certain areas, and my wrists ached. I had never struck anyone like that before.

I looked up to see faces peeking into the washroom. I marched toward the exit, snatching my discarded towel up from the floor as I went. Past my unconscious guards, through the crowd of men, and into my bedroom I walked, head held high.

* * *

Someone knocked on my door not long after I had changed into my nightshirt. After my display of ferocity in the washroom, I'd had something of a panic attack. I had pushed my desk against the door to discourage anyone else from assaulting me in my vulnerable state and had huddled in the corner until my emotions had calmed.

I sat on the desk's surface now. "Who is it?"

"Bryn," he whispered, but I heard him perfectly. "Everyone is talking about what happened in the washroom earlier. Are you all right?"

I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. My hands, now clean, burned with small cuts and fresh sores. "I don't know."

He uttered a soft curse. "I'm sorry, Asta. I'm going to tell my father in the morning and those four will be punished. I promise no one will attempt to harm you again."

My throat ached at his words. I knew hardly anything about him, couldn't fathom his reasons for helping me, and didn't know if I could trust him. But in that moment, I didn't care. "Thank you."

"Here." He pushed a dagger through the gap under the door.

I climbed off the desk and bent to retrieve it. My copper eyes were reflected in the blade.

"We aren't allowed to have weapons in our rooms but, under the circumstances, I don't think my father will object. Don't be afraid to

use it, Asta. Anyone who breaks into your room or tries to corner you in the washroom again deserves whatever they get."

I shuddered. "Bryn, I don't think I—"

"If you use it on yourself, I will do everything in my power to bring you back," he said sternly. "Then I'll give you a scolding that would make Viggo proud, and I won't ever trust you with anything again. Am I clear?"

I managed a sad little smile. "Yes, sir."

I woke with a gasp. The doctor knelt over me, sleeves rolled up to his elbows. There was blood on his hands. I scrambled away from him and backed into the wall. My scarred hands fluttered over the length of my torso, looking for the new injury he'd caused.

"It's all right, girl," the doctor said. "I've only revived you."

The general pushed himself off the wall. "You tried to die on us, Asta, but we weren't finished for the night." He nodded at the doctor. "Restrain her."

I jerked awake and almost fell out of bed, soaked in sweat, my heart charging away in my rib cage. I dissolved into hysterical sobs. The memory of the pain was too fresh. I kicked off the covers and peeled away the nightshirt to inspect my body. The absence of blood and wounds didn't comfort me as it should've. Once back in my nightshirt, I burrowed into my covers, shut my eyes, and tried to go back to sleep.

Someone was snoring. There were walls between us and I could still hear him as if he were in the room with me. A bell began to chime on the other side of the grounds. To my ears it sounded as if it were in the next building over. I put the pillow over my head and gritted my teeth.

How can anyone with Dotharr's accursed gifts live a normal life?

One of my guards knocked. "That's your wake-up call, girl! You're expected to be at breakfast within the hour."

I threw my pillow at the door.

The Feasting Hall buzzed with noise until I walked in. Complete and utter silence took hold, unlike any I could have imagined from a large number of people. Instead of being disgusted with me, many of my peers were wary. I carried my tray of oatmeal, bread, assorted fruit, and milk to the table where Bryn sat, waiting for me.

"What happened to the four imbeciles?" I asked once I was seated.

My guards sat with us today, one on either side of me, and dug into their breakfast. Their eyes swept the hall occasionally.

Bryn glanced at the additions to our table before addressing me. “They were given five lashings each. It’s the standard punishment for starting a brawl. Everyone knows that. If it wasn’t enough to discourage your attackers, I doubt it will discourage anyone else.”

“Wonderful,” I murmured.

“But you handled yourself better than anyone expected. That could either make others who seek to harm you think twice about coming after you, or force them to be more creative with their assaults. Since you can’t trust your guards—”

“They took us by surprise!” one of them said. “It won’t happen again.”

Bryn frowned. “I’m sure.” He glanced at me. “You should stay alert at all times, just in case.”

I nodded.

“Have you taken a look at your schedule yet?” Bryn asked, as if to lighten the mood.

I retrieved the parchment from my trouser pocket and unfolded it on the tabletop. “Hand-to-Hand Combat, Religious Studies, Weaponry, Arithmetic, Breaking and Entering…” I raised an eyebrow at Bryn.

He popped a strawberry into his mouth. “Breaching the defenses of an armed building isn’t a skill only used for thievery.”

I frowned but continued reading. “This afternoon I have Politics and Government, Battle Strategy, History, and Acrobatics.” I leaned in closer to be sure I read it right. “Acrobatics? Are they preparing us for the circus?”

Bryn gulped down his milk before responding. “That class is improperly named. It’s mostly for the strengthening of our reflexes and dexterity, but also touches on techniques we can use to lessen the intensity of our senses. We only learn the basic flips and turns on trampolines. It also includes lessons on climbing and falling correctly.”

I almost choked on my oatmeal. I coughed for a moment, eyes watering. “Is there a way to fall *incorrectly*?”

Bryn nodded. “Landing on your feet from a certain height could break your legs, Asta. There are different methods of falling to ensure the preservation of one’s limbs. Acrobatics teaches you these methods.”

“Unfathomable,” I replied with a shake of my head.

He tore his bread into pieces and shrugged. “Could save your life one day.”

“So how often does the school host graduations?” I asked. “Is it possible to graduate in a year’s time?”

“There are at least two graduation ceremonies a year. You see, we all take the same classes but we advance to higher difficulties of those classes as our skills increase. Right now you’ll be in the beginner

courses for all of these subjects, but with hard work and dedication, you can be in the master courses in seven months' time."

"And how long should it take to be done with the master courses?"

Bryn considered this before answering. "My father said it took him six months to complete his master courses."

I'll complete them in five, I thought with confidence. *Then the general will die*. "Well, it seems I have my work cut out for me."

He looked down and mixed his oatmeal with a spoon. I wanted to ask him what was on his mind, but doubted he would be honest while my guards were listening. One guard eventually rose to get seconds. I gulped down the rest of my milk and held out my empty mug to the second guard.

"Refill it yourself," he said with a grunt.

"I'm still sore from that surprise attack in the washroom."

He scowled at me.

"It'll only take you a moment," I insisted. "If anyone tries to attack me while you're gone, I'm sure Bryn will step in."

The guard threw my companion a suspicious glance, but must have come to the conclusion that Bryn was trustworthy because he, too, left.

"I think I found a way to be expelled from this academy once and for all," Bryn leaned in to whisper once we were alone.

I blinked. "You're leaving so soon?"

Bryn shushed me and looked around to be sure no one had heard. He lowered his voice even more. "I might be, but you mustn't tell Viggo. He'll try to convince me to stay."

I thought about making him promise to say goodbye, but thought better of it. I still didn't know why he was entrusting me with this information or why he was so concerned with my well-being. However thankful I was for his presence, I couldn't help being wary.

Laughter drew our attention to a table across the hall. The added noise of utensils against plates made me wince. When we weren't speaking, it was hard not to be overwhelmed by what I could hear and smell.

Bryn leaned back and tried to look inconspicuous when my guards returned. "I've been thinking of several names for you."

I shook my head. "I'm keeping my name."

"Once you graduate from this academy, you'll be free to go by whatever you please but, during your time here, they *are* going to change your name." Bryn popped a blueberry in his mouth and swallowed it whole. "Wouldn't you rather have an opinion on what you're called? I've compiled a list if you'd like to hear it."

Sighing, I agreed to listen.

“There is Hertha, which means powerful woman. I thought it fitting after your display of power last night.”

I wrinkled my nose. “When I hear that name, I think of an old and bitter grandmother.”

Bryn chuckled. “Very well. There’s Siri, which means marvelous victory. Despite what you’ve been through, you’re still alive. Doesn’t it suit you?”

“You know I don’t consider being alive a victory,” I said, picking at my fruit.

He frowned. “Moving along. Thyra is another I thought you might like. It means like thunder.”

I gave him a flat look.

“Another no then,” Bryn guessed. “Well, the last one the academy would consider is Iona, which means born on an island.”

I thought about this, growing somber. “It does appear that I’m being reborn on Holger… You said this was the last one the *academy* would consider, but do you have another?”

“Yes, it’s the one I gave you before I learned of your true name,” Bryn said, suddenly shy. “Freja. It means like a lady.”

My face burned. *How can he possibly think me ladylike? So far he’s seen me bloodied and dressed in men’s clothes*.

He waved away my embarrassment. “Think about the names, all right? Now finish your breakfast. Classes will begin soon.”

Chapter Five

I jogged into my first class and stopped short. There were no seats. My peers sat cross-legged on the padded floor. I ignored their annoyed glances and sat against the wall toward the back of the room. Thankfully, my guards stayed by the door. Several more men trickled in before two barrel-chested instructors entered the room. They wore the same jerkin, trousers, and boots we wore.

"Good morning, warriors," one said.

"Good morning, sirs!" the class chorused.

"Pick a grappling partner," the second instructor said. "We will be learning new holds today."

The men around me paired up quickly, avoiding my eyes. The instructors noticed me standing alone and murmured among themselves for a moment.

"Brandt!" one finally shouted. "You'll be working with the girl."

A young man about my height with short, golden hair nodded curtly before coming to my side. He held his hand out, but wouldn't meet my gaze. I shook his hand.

The instructors stood on an elevated platform toward the front of the class so that we could all see them. They led us in the proper stretches before they demonstrated the holds and how to escape them. Then we were given time to practice with our partners. It was awkward being in a strange man's embrace and my back ached when he pressed me into the floor. But I was determined to do well. He released me when I used even the slightest force, happy for any excuse to move away from me.

"You mustn't treat me differently because I'm a woman," I said. "I have to learn."

Brandt frowned uncomfortably, but nodded all the same. I was thankful for his resistance during the second attempt. It took more strength to free myself, but I felt some measure of accomplishment. When he rushed at me, I was thankful for my enhanced reflexes. Without them, he could have easily overwhelmed me.

Once ten minutes had passed, the instructors called the class to order and proceeded to a new series of holds. I was tired, slick with sweat, and bleeding from my back by the end of the hour, but exhilarated as well. I would be better prepared for another attack if and when more disgruntled peers gained enough confidence to do so.

"Thank you," I said before Brandt could flee.

He nodded and hurried after his friends, who peppered him with questions the moment he was close enough. It didn't bother me. They were merely curious about what it had been like to wrestle with a

woman. I believed I had successfully held my own and was proud of myself. I left the classroom, already looking forward to returning.

Religious Studies bored me. I didn't care for the Heavenly Masters of these barbarians. The legends of how each had ascended into godhood sounded like fables created to put children to sleep. I wrote down as much as I could follow on the parchment-like paper I was given only so that I wouldn't die from overexposure to tediousness. How was I supposed to remember the difference between Rumatoa, the Master of Labor, and Alun, the Master of Food? A baker labored to make his bread and yet his Heavenly Master would not be Rumatoa. Vuseth and Ishem were terribly similar as well. Why couldn't there be only one Heavenly Master of Minds instead of a Master of Science and a Master of Intellect?

Nua, Lisodinae, and Dotharr were the only ones I could keep straight; Nua being the Master of Holiness, Lisodinae being the Master of Mortality, and Dotharr being the academy's namesake. Oh, and there was also Sippa, the Master of Artists, but no one seemed to care too much about her.

A new energy had been awoken in me during my previous class; I couldn't seem to stop tapping my feet or my fingers during the lecture. I raced out of the classroom once the hour was through.

I rejoiced upon discovering that my next class was fencing. We were going to start with every kind of sword known to man, but would eventually move on to other weapons. In this class, our instructor was going to teach us how to hold each weapon, different ways to strike and defend ourselves with them, which foot patterns were most appropriate while fighting with them, and how to maintain them.

I was given a short sword and paired with a scrawny redhead who was terrified of me. I defeated him in two moves. The instructor then paired me up with a taller, beefier young man who smirked at me as if I were no competition. Despite wielding a new kind of sword, I defeated him in four moves. Slightly frustrated, the instructor paired me up with a third man, the leanest and swiftest in the class. Then he handed me a different sword and hovered nearby while we fought. I defeated my new opponent in nine moves. To my immense satisfaction, the instructor declared that he had never seen a beginner adapt so quickly.

The entire class lined up to fight me after that, determined to be the first to beat me. I was eventually defeated by the fourth to last because I was so exhausted. The instructor said I would be allowed to move on to the ax tomorrow, ahead of schedule. He thought me

intermediate course ready but I needed to know how to handle shorter-range weapons before I could be transferred. I couldn't wait to brag to Bryn.

I stared at the chalkboard as my Arithmatic instructor wrote out the problems we were to solve. I copied them down on my parchment, hoping it would help to see them in my own hand. But, no, the combination of numbers and words were just as foreign and frustrating as before. Huffing, I leaned back in my seat.

"Girl."

"Asta," I said, looking up. "And I'm twenty years old. I'm hardly a girl anymore."

My instructor had abandoned the board and walked down the row to stand before my desk. A tall young man with straw-colored hair and a shy smile stood beside him, clutching his books and scrolls to his chest. He reminded me so much of Kustaav that it almost brought me to tears.

"I realize that this may be the first time you've ever seen numbers," the instructor said with a haughty air that irked me immediately, "but I haven't the time to help you catch up to the other members of my class."

"I'll have you know that I took a whole year of arithmacy before I came here," I muttered. "I'm well-versed in the history of the mainland, and I can read and write as well."

The instructor drew back and stared down his nose at me, apparently affronted. "So you won't be needing assistance?"

Smothering my pride, I said, "I might have studied but I'm no expert."

"Very well," he said with a sniff. "This is Frode, the brightest student in the class. If you should need anything, ask him." Then he returned to his lectern at the front of the room.

Frode slid into the empty desk beside me. "At your service, miss," he said softly.

I swallowed with difficulty and nodded in his direction. He stretched out a blank scroll of parchment and weighed it down with two smooth stones he'd extracted from his pocket. He copied down the problems from the chalkboard and worked on them with his head bent over his desk. The scratching of quills filled the room. It seemed I was the only one who had no idea how to proceed.

I cleared my throat. "Frode?"

"Yes?" He looked up, but not directly at me, as if ashamed to meet my gaze.

"Can you…?" It was a struggle to get the words out. "Can you help me with this?"

"What specifically?"

"All of it, really."

I was pleasantly surprised to see him smile.

"Very well. Let's start with the first problem."

Ten doorways had been installed in the room of my next course. The instructor stood on an elevated platform and spoke about each tool in our lock-picking sets. Then he demonstrated how to pick the lock of one of the doors, explaining each step as he did it.

"Your turn," he said once his door had been successfully opened. "Form lines before each door and practice."

It took longer than I liked to unlock my door. The young men in line behind me sighed heavily, rolled their eyes, tapped their feet impatiently, and murmured insults under their breath. But I eventually did get my door unlocked. I hurried past my disgruntled peers with my eyes downcast. I reviewed my tools while my classmates unlocked their doors, determined to be faster next time.

Whispers drew my gaze to a group of approaching young warriors. My guards abandoned their posts by the door and came to stand by me, weapons drawn. The young men faltered for a moment before continuing on their way.

Bryn beamed at me. "And how was your morning session, Miss Asta?"

I eased into the seat across from him, too ashamed to admit that I had enjoyed myself. "It went well."

"Rumors of your prowess are already spreading," he said. "You can't hide the truth from me. You know you belong here."

I sighed. "All right! I had a wonderful, enlightening time. Except in Religious Studies and Arithmetic; those two classes are the worst. Satisfied?"

"Very," Bryn replied before he spooned rice into his mouth at an unnatural speed.

I found myself eating my lunch similarly. I had consumed so much energy this morning it didn't bother me that the fish on my plate still had eyes. I devoured it along with my asparagus.

"Soon this table will be filled with admirers," Bryn teased with his mouth full. "It won't matter that you're a woman."

I scoffed. "I don't wish to make friends while I'm here."

"Then who will keep you company when I'm gone?" Bryn lowered his voice to ask, although the amused glint in his eye was still there.

I frowned at him. "I'll keep my own company."

We both looked up when someone approached our table. Viggo

held his tray and frowned down at the pair of us. He had a fresh scrape across his brow.

Bryn leaned back in his seat and grinned. “Yes? Can we help you?”

“May I join you?” Viggo asked tersely.

“This is Asta’s table, didn’t you know? You have to ask for her permission.”

Viggo’s frown deepened and his grip on the tray tightened. I would have been fearful for Bryn’s well-being if I didn’t know they were such good friends.

Turning sharply in my direction, Viggo asked, “May I join your table?”

I found it very difficult not to smile, but I managed to nod.

He dropped onto the bench beside Bryn and immediately began discussing one of the classes they shared as if I wasn’t there. Soon Asger and the other two came to sit with us. They didn’t speak to me but nodded in acknowledgement.

I found my next class fascinating. During the lecture, I gained a clearer picture of Holger’s government structure. The king had a group of ten counselors, usually chosen for their loyalty and friendship, but also if they were known for making wise decisions. Meetings were held weekly to discuss country-wide issues, ideas for new laws to eradicate those issues, budget cuts, the raising or lowering of taxes, and any troublemakers who threatened to turn the people against their king. Anyone in the meeting could make a suggestion, but the king made the final decision. Always.

We were also going to be studying the different royal families the island had seen since its institution and the significant impacts each monarch made. To begin, I learned a great deal about King Tatsuo, the current king’s father and Holger’s Mighty Dragon, than I ever thought I’d want to know. It was he who proposed the Quest for Resources fifteen years ago. It was his dream to gather more natural resources and create settlements in other nations so that his people could live elsewhere without losing their culture. His counselors agreed until they heard of the method with which the king planned to do this. They wanted peaceful negotiation, assurance that immigrants from Holger would be happily received by their sister nations; King Tatsuo wanted a glorious, bloody war.

When the counselors failed to convince him to change his mind, they decided dethroning him would be the only way to save the other nations and preserve Holger’s good name. King Tatsuo wouldn’t step down quietly. He was tried and eventually executed. Torvald was the rightful heir to the throne but was only five years old when his father

died. The counselors made most of the decisions until he turned fifteen and became of ruling age. The Quest for Resources was put on hold until a suitable general could be found to lead the militia that would follow the king's diplomats onto foreign soil.

Halvar had grown up in the southern section of the island. The fire that had only marred his face had taken his parents' lives. A kind stranger had paid for his tuition so that he could attend Dotharr's Academy. He'd been an average graduate but his mysterious benefactor had, apparently, had friends in high places. Halvar had been given a job at a security firm that worked with one of the biggest banks on the island. There he built a spotless reputation for himself and caught the attention of the counselors. He seemed the perfect soldier for the job they had in mind. The counselors made Halvar a general and had him swear an oath to only step in if the king's representatives were in danger. Then they set out to bargain for the resources that would save Holger's people.

I gripped my quill until my knuckles hurt. Perhaps there had been some wisdom to Bryn's plan of exposing the general's lies to the public. His history would be taught differently if it were known why he had been murdered by Dotharr's Miracle. I considered this as the class came to an end.

Battle Strategy was held outside, for which I was thankful. Despite the cloudy skies, it was a beautiful morning and I was tired of being cooped up. A wooden castle keep had been constructed in the grass for us to practice group infiltration. The instructor split the class into two teams and chose 'commanders.' Every day, a different person would be chosen to lead the assault on the keep or lead their team in defending the keep. Mobile curtain walls, turrets, and a gatehouse could be added to the keep to present each commander with a new challenge. We were given metal, plate-like chest and back protectors along with blunt swords and short bows that shot arrows with broad, rounded tips. One team's armor was black, while the other team's was white.

The instructor explained that if we sustained injuries to the arms or legs, we could continue participating. If we were shot or stabbed in the chest or back, the sound of the hit would be heard by all. That meant we were 'dead' and had to remove ourselves from the keep. If we lost our weapons during the scrimmage, we were allowed to steal the weapons of our opponents. All and any forms of self-defense were allowed. We were only prohibited from aiming for each other's heads or groins. Once the rules had been explained, the teams split up. My team was infiltrating so we gathered a ways away from the keep to talk strategy. A young man named Rainer was chosen to be our

commander. He was head and shoulders above all of us with a splash of freckles across his nose and spiky brown hair.

"Our objective is to eliminate every member of the opposing team," he said. "When the battle is through, we only need one person from our team 'alive' in order to claim the victory. Instructor Gulbrand has given us the plans for the structure." Rainer unrolled a scroll and examined it. "It appears there is only room for three people to stand on the keep's roof. The stairway to the top of the keep is too narrow for more than one person to pass through at a time."

We turned in unison to see the instructor and two of his helpers wheeling in more wooden structures. A gatehouse and two curtain walls joined the keep.

Rainer drew our eyes back to himself by clearing his throat. "Those walls are only long and thick enough to hold four people at a time. The gatehouse is our only true obstacle. According to this design, it has six windows; two on the front, two on the back, and one on each side. Six people can be standing in the upper level. Four people can also be standing on its roof and two people standing side by side can fit through the entrance. If I were defending, I would put as many of my people in the gatehouse as possible and only put a handful of my most skilled warriors in and around the keep. I propose we do the same. We will focus our numbers on the gatehouse and walls, and only send the five most accomplished among us to the keep."

"How do we determine who should storm the keep?" a short man with a round, anxious face asked.

A lean, long-faced man toward the back raised his hand. "I'm due to be transferred to an intermediate Weaponry class."

"As am I," said another.

"As am I," I added.

Those around me gave me distrustful glances. Rainer regarded me thoughtfully.

"I have seen her in action."

I was surprised to see Brandt among us. He didn't look at me, but I was touched that he had vouched for me at all.

Brandt shrugged when our commander raised his eyebrows. "She's strong and quick on her feet. She's also a woman. They won't expect her to be capable of overwhelming them."

Rainer nodded. "Very well. This is your chance to impress me, girl. If you fail—"

"Asta."

He faltered, surprised at being interrupted. "Pardon?"

"My name is Asta."

"That isn't a warrior's name," someone behind me scoffed.

“No,” I said, unable to contain my annoyance, “but it’s my name and I won’t be changing it.”

The declaration was met with silence.

“I’m due to be transferred to an intermediate Hand-to-Hand Combat course,” a young man close to Rainer piped up.

Our commander nodded. “Very well. Those moving on to intermediate classes soon will join me in storming the keep. The rest of you spread out, stay alert, target one person at a time but be on the lookout for archers. No doubt they will be placed on the walls and upper level of the gatehouse. Ready?”

The group nodded, sharing nervous glances or excited grins.

Rainer raised his sword, pointing at the keep several meters behind us. “Charge!”

Chapter Six

Heart galloping in my chest, I charged toward the gatehouse with my team. I felt the pressure to do well like an anvil over my head. Already my peers had begun to talk about my skill. I couldn't disappoint them and prove the rumors were exaggerations. I suddenly wanted their respect.

When Rainer and the other three separated from the rest, I didn't follow. I sprinted around the other curtain wall, bow and arrow ready. My father had given me a short, wooden bow with two arrows for my eleventh birthday. The bow I held now was no different.

The enemy shot their arrows at me but I was too quick for them. I ducked, turned, dove to the ground, rolled, and leapt back to my feet. I raised my bow, aimed at one of the white plates on the wall, and let the arrow fly. I didn't stop to see if it had reached its mark. I moved in an agile sideways jog toward the keep while I drew arrow after arrow from my quiver and fired at every white plate I could see. When the arrows stopped coming at me, I dashed in the direction of the keep. Rainer and two of the warriors with him were clashing swords with those guarding the keep door.

The last man from our infiltration team danced at a distance, firing arrows at the archers on the keep's roof. As I drew close to him, I yanked the quiver up and over my head, and dropped it beside him on the ground. "Here!"

"What are you doing?" he asked, without taking his eyes off the enemy.

"Giving you more ammunition." I slung my bow across my back and continued racing to the keep.

Rainer saw me fly past and opened his mouth to say something. He never got the chance to speak; his opponent swiped at his knees and distracted him. I took the stairs two at a time and drew my sword before emerging among the archers. Two swings later and they were down. The remaining archer was shot by my team's archer on the ground. All three of my now 'dead' enemies blinked at me in surprise. I flashed them a grin before darting back down the stairs.

Rainer and my team's archer met me at the entrance of the keep. Apparently, the other two had been 'stabbed' during their scrimmages and had left the scene.

Rainer was the most surprised. "How did you—?"

"No time." I pointed to the gatehouse. "They need us." I led them in the sprint back to our team.

The enemy archers began firing as soon as we were within range. I pushed my team's archer out of harm's way and took an arrow to the

shoulder. Pain raced up my neck and down my arm. I grimaced and glared up at the men along the wall.

"Are you all right?" Rainer asked us both.

Our team's archer shot to his feet and began returning fire by way of response.

"I've been hit. It looks like you two are on your own. Good luck." I rose from the ground and proceeded to leave the battlefield.

"Asta."

I sheathed my sword and turned.

Rainer smiled. "Nicely done."

I nodded in thanks and joined my 'dead' peers on the sidelines.

* * *

I was still rejoicing when I walked into my History class. I may not have been the one to lead my team to victory, but I had single-handedly defeated six opponents before I was 'killed.' That had been enough to impress the men on my team.

I half listened to the lecture about Holger's educational system's development and thought about how I would storm the keep when it was my turn to be commander. I drew the keep, the gatehouse, the curtain walls, and turrets in different layouts and determined the most efficient ways to defeat the enemy. I even considered various ways to defend the keep. That was, until my instructor asked me a question I didn't know the answer to. I stammered an apology and tried to focus more on history.

I couldn't help sending a prayer of thanks to my father. He hadn't treated me like he had treated Sylvi. He had known I was interested in more than sewing, drawing, singing, dancing, table decorating, embroidering cushions, and painting wooden handheld fans. He hadn't tried to squeeze me into the mold of the average country girl. Instead, he had embraced my curiosity and allowed me to study more 'masculine' subjects such as literature and arithmetic, archery, and horseback riding. That short bow he gave me had prepared me for Battle Strategy. My father had inadvertently given me an advantage.

I had to stop thinking about him then because my eyes were burning. I blinked several times to get rid of the moisture and studied the map the instructor was pointing at.

Acrobatics was much more painful than Bryn had let on. We began learning how to do back flips on individual trampolines that were about two meters long by two meters wide. We jumped three times to gain momentum before attempting to flip our bodies as the

instructor had demonstrated. This resulted in all sorts of painful landings, none of which were on our feet.

To give us a break and a chance to recover from our new bruises, the instructor led us in hearing exercises. He clashed cymbals and screamed at us through a microphone while our partners whispered messages to us from across the room. My partner thought this was a great opportunity to tell me exactly how he felt about being in the same class as a woman. I whispered insults about his mother when it was his turn to listen. He looked angry enough to charge me, but didn't dare do anything while my guards stood at the ready.

Next, we were lined up before cans of garbage and sewage. There was a freshly-baked pastry somewhere underneath all the filth; we were supposed to find it by using our noses. We were blindfolded and given five minutes. I shuddered and gulped back the vomit, refusing to let my peers think me delicate or squeamish.

Once the exercise had been completed, we were led outside to be doused in water and then called back into the classroom. We assembled beside a tightrope that spanned the width of the room, but was only elevated several yards above the padded ground. We took turns trying to walk across it without falling.

Muscles in my stomach and upper thighs, muscles I hadn't been aware of before entering the class, were sore when the hour was through. I winced with every step that took me back to my room. I threw myself onto my bed and let out a low moan. Surely my body would grow accustomed to the exercise and abuse it was sustaining, but at that moment, I felt heavy with fatigue and soreness. I was hungry when the bell rang for dinner some minutes later, but I couldn't move. Footsteps made the floor tremble and my sensitive head ache. I lifted my pillow and pressed it against my face, attempting to stifle the noise.

I'd left my door ajar, and suddenly it creaked open farther. I tossed the pillow aside with one hand and stuffed the other hand into the crease between the bed frame and mattress. I whipped out my dagger and sat up, ready to defend myself. Bryn raised his hands in the air, a sheepish smile on his amiable face. I relaxed and bent to pick up my pillow from the floor.

Bryn lowered his hands but stayed in the doorway. "I wanted to be sure you were still alive. We lighten the educational load for no one."

"My limbs feel like wet cloth; heavy and much too supple," I said with a groan. "Have you any herbs that can help with the soreness?"

Bryn chuckled. "I just so happen to have a sample of my muscle relaxant." He held out a small glass jar filled with a yellowish-green paste.

I could smell its acrid odor from the bed, but rose to accept it anyway. “Thanks. Once again, you’re my savior.”

Bryn bowed his head with a modest smile.

One of my guards walked up to us as we stood in the doorway. “If your friend is walking you to dinner, I’m going to take a shower. My counterpart is napping, but will wake in an hour.”

“Do what you want,” I said, turning the concoction over in my hands.

“I’ll take care of her,” Bryn vowed, and then we were alone. He leaned in and lowered his voice. “Before we make line for dinner, I have something to ask of you.”

I looked up at him in surprise and a little fear. “Are you calling in your favor already?”

“I must.” He slid his hand into the pocket of his trousers and retrieved a sealed envelope. He turned it several times, those glowing eyes somber. He eventually held it out to me. “Would you give this to Viggo after I’m gone?”

“Why don’t you give it to him yourself? You owe him a proper goodbye after all you’ve—” I snapped my mouth shut when a group of stragglers came down the hall.

They greeted Bryn in passing. He nodded and smiled in response, but the smile was gone as soon as they had descended to the next story.

He gave me a severe look. “This is the only thing I’ve asked for since you came here and you’re refusing to do it?”

I shook my head. “He’ll be furious. With you gone, he’ll have no one left to take his anger out on but me. Are you trying to put me in harm’s way?”

“You’ll be in no danger of Viggo’s temper. I would leave it in his room if I wasn’t so afraid of someone accidentally finding it before him.” His eyes grew pleading. “I don’t have the heart to say goodbye in person, even indirectly. Please, Asta. Please, do this for me.”

I looked down at the envelope, proof that my only ally on Holger really was leaving, and bit my tongue. I took the letter and shoved it under my mattress along with my dagger.

A relieved smile broke across his face. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Don’t look so forlorn,” he said with an affectionate nudge. “It’ll still take many more weeks to plan and execute my escape.”

I laughed a little. “That’s good to hear.”

“Come,” Bryn said, clapping me on the shoulder. “Let’s eat.”

I left his muscle relaxant on my chest of drawers and closed the door behind me.

“You’re assimilating perfectly into the academy,” Bryn said,

walking me down the hall. “You’ll do just fine on your own.” He pursed his lips and furrowed his brow. “It’s Viggo I’m concerned about…”

“I’ll take care of your friend,” I said, but only because I felt like he was looking for some reassurance.

Bryn smiled again. “He won’t thank you for that, but I will. You’re a jewel among women.”

I snorted. “He says to the girl who is just as smelly as he is!”

He laughed all the way to the Feasting Hall.

Hurried footsteps woke me out of a dead sleep before the bell could chime. Rolling over, I determined to go back to sleep. But then there came a knock on my door. I sat up, ignoring the protests of every muscle in my body, and groggily went to open it. Bode the errand man stood before me, his clothes disheveled, his hair unkempt, his eyes bloodshot, his skin wan.

“Get dressed, girl,” he hissed. “The director wants to speak with you.”

I shut the door in his face, stomach squirming in fear. It had to be about Bryn. The director of the academy wouldn’t wake me before five in the morning to congratulate me on a good first day. Had he perhaps found out about Bryn’s plans? Had Bryn been dragged out of bed and punished? Even if that were so, why would the director want to see *me*? Viggo had been his friend the longest.

I rushed into the new undergarments that had been purchased for me and threw on my clothes. I slipped into my lounging shoes, which looked suspiciously like leather slippers, and joined Bode in the hallway. The guard who was keeping watch gave us a strange look as we left.

“What happened?” I asked, struggling to keep up with Bode’s brisk pace.

“Later,” he said. “You’ll wake everyone.”

I scowled at him but kept my questions to myself. I wasn’t ready for the bitter cold of night. It seeped through my lounging shirt and trousers the moment we set foot outside. Wrapping my arms around my torso, I shivered.

“Now can I ask what’s happened?” I said once we were halfway across the square.

“Keep your voice down!” Bode took a deep breath and attempted to regain his composure. “It’s Brynjar. He’s fled.”

I stopped dead in my tracks, unable to believe it. I had just spoken to him at dinner. We discussed my classes, compared scars we knew would be gone in a matter of days, gossiped about our instructors… Even Viggo and the others had chimed in once or twice.

Hurt and shame made me feel sick. *He lied to me!*

"Come along," Bode said over his shoulder.

"How?" I sputtered, hurrying after him. "When?"

"I don't know! Sometime this morning or perhaps in the dead of night. He broke into the safe, took his academic file, and stole his father's signet ring. We can only assume he means to forge his expulsion."

"How did he get past the security guards?"

"With a sleeping draught of his own concoction, no doubt. Our men are scattered throughout the grounds, having suddenly fallen asleep where they stood. The sneaky little bastard must have slipped it to me as well. When I awoke to the director's shouting, my mind was in a haze and it was hard to concentrate. I was still dressed in my clothes and couldn't remember falling asleep. Brynjar must've stolen my keys, let himself into the main office, and picked the lock on the safe, which is supposed to be impossible." Almost as a side note to himself, Bode murmured, "I'll have to complain to the locksmith."

I made a sound of outrage at the back of my throat. "How could it have been so easy for Bryn to—?"

"Do all this without arousing suspicion?" Bode chuckled. It wasn't a pretty sound. "That boy may be smiles and kindness on the outside, but he is devious. He'll use anything and anyone for his own purposes. He might have even used you without your knowledge. What did he tell you? Did he ask anything of you?"

I thought about the envelope. Bryn said it was his goodbye to Viggo. Could it be something else? Perhaps instructions on how to follow him? But why would he give that information to his friend? Viggo wouldn't go looking for Bryn and risk expulsion. Bryn would know this. It had to be as innocent as he said it was. Still, I couldn't help but doubt his true character. What I saw could have been only what he wanted me to see. I hadn't known him long enough to say with confidence that he was as kind and innocent as he had appeared to be. I couldn't betray him without real cause, however, not after all he'd done for me.

I cleared my throat. "He said he was planning on leaving but he didn't tell me how."

Bode scoffed. "He was trying to protect you. Perhaps he cared for you after all."

"Why does the director want to see me?"

"Because Viggo would rather die than betray the trust of his friend," Bode said as if it were obvious. "Brynjar wouldn't risk giving his brother in arms any useful information for fear of Viggo being harmed for it. You, on the other hand, we aren't so sure about."

"I already told you everything he told me."

Bode opened the door to the main office and held it open for me. “We’ll see about that.”

* * *

A small glass was placed on the desk before me. The liquid inside was dark and had an odd scent.

The director glared at me. “Drink it.” He was taller than Bryn and of a broader build. His dark hair was cropped short. It didn’t look like he could be Bryn’s father, especially with the harsh scowl on his face and the anger in his bright eyes.

“I already told you what Bryn told me,” I said.

“If you want me to trust you, girl—”

“Asta.”

The director rose from his chair with a snarl. “*I don’t care what your name is!*”

I flinched, ears ringing.

Director Endre took several moments to breathe and collect himself. He scowled down at that shot class. “If you want me to trust you, you will drink it.”

I took the glass between my thumb and forefinger, and downed the liquid.

Director Endre eased back into his chair. “Did you know what my son was planning?”

I crossed my arms. “No.”

“Did he ever speak to you about his unhappiness?”

“Yes. He wanted to become a doctor. He said you wouldn’t let him try.”

The director’s glowing eyes narrowed. “Did he explain why?”

“You believe he can only bring you honor by being a warrior,” I muttered in disgust.

He leapt to his feet and struck me across the face. I fell out of my chair with a shout. The director rounded the desk and pulled me up by my hair. I bit my tongue to refrain from shouting again.

“You are not a native Holgarian,” he said, his face uncomfortably close to mine. “You must know what it’s like to be forever separated from the people you care about. Olga, my wife, my friend, my *life*, was murdered. I heard about it too late to avenge her. My son—” He cursed rather colorfully and threw me back into the chair.

I gripped my head, scalp and eyes stinging.

The director gave me his back and kicked at the safe’s open door. It swung into the wall with a crack, revealing the files it stored.

“I see her in my son,” he said. “Brynjar has her smile, her kind

heart, her brilliant mind… I can't let him become a doctor. He can't become more like her. It will destroy me. He must be someone else entirely. He must be—"

"Himself."

The director glared over his shoulder at me.

I sat up in my chair, knowing that speaking the truth would only guarantee another blow, but whatever he had given me forced my thoughts to become words. "Bryn must be allowed to seek his own path and discover himself or he will never love you as a son should love his father. If medical school is a mistake, let him learn that himself. He will come back on his own. If it isn't a mistake, he will thrive. Is that not what you want? The happiness of your son?"

"What I want is to be *free* of her!" the director roared. "I want to be rid of her memory. I can't even bear to look at him, my own son, because of *her*."

"With all due respect, sir, that isn't Bryn's fault. Perhaps this separation will be good for the both of you. Perhaps it will give you the necessary time to heal."

The director waved away my words. "He belongs here. Dotharr has chosen him to become a warrior. Running away from his fate is not only disrespectful, but irresponsible and selfish. Tell me where he went."

I rolled my eyes. "You know where he went."

Director Endre's hands turned into fists at his sides. "The medical school on this island starts six weeks from now. Brynjar must hide somewhere while his application is being processed. Where did he go?"

"I don't know!" I shouted. "And I'm glad of it because I can't betray him even with your damned truth juice."

The director slammed his fist into his desk. The wood groaned. "*Then how did he do it?* How could he have left Viggo and the rest of his friends behind without saying goodbye, without alerting them even in the slightest about what he was going to do?"

I swallowed against the lump in my throat. "I don't know."

Chapter Seven

I sat alone at breakfast, mechanically bringing the spoon from my plate to my mouth and back. I had no appetite after my interrogation this morning, but knew that I wouldn't have the strength to do well in my classes if I had an empty stomach.

Sleep had evaded me after Bode had escorted me back to my room. I had sobbed into my pillow as quietly as I could and hoped no one could hear, but they would know something was wrong just by looking at me. My eyes were always bloodshot after a good cry.

I couldn't meet anyone's gaze. My chest felt hollow, my head heavy. From his father's description, Brynjar had been everything he had seemed to be; a kind, considerate man who wanted to be my friend. And still, I'd expected the worst of him. A stab of shame made my chest ache.

Now he's gone, and I'll never be able to say how sorry I am for ever doubting his intentions.

I sniffled and wiped my eyes with my sleeve. I tore into my crust of bread and tried to put it out of my mind. Then I caught sight of Viggo stalking toward me. The look on his face… it was beyond anger, beyond hurt. He didn't stop at my table. He grabbed a fistful of my sleeve, pulled me out of my chair, and proceeded to drag me out of the Feasting Hall.

"Hey!" my guards shouted, dropping their utensils and rushing to my aid.

Viggo hauled me around the corner of the building and threw me against the wall. My shoulder hit the cement, jarring my still-tender back. I didn't have it in me to be afraid. I simply winced and looked down at my feet.

Viggo loomed over me, the anger rolling off of him in waves. "What do you know?"

My guards charged out of the building and ran toward us.

"It's all right," I murmured, knowing they could hear me even from a distance. "He just wants to talk."

The guards skidded to a halt, weapons raised, narrowed eyes fixed on Viggo.

"He's given you trouble before," one of them said. "How can we trust he won't—?"

"Do anything that will get him in trouble?" I asked, suddenly annoyed. "He's too proud of his blessing from Dotharr to do anything that will jeopardize his future as a warrior. Go back to your breakfast. I'm not in danger here."

The guards exchanged a look. One of them shoved Viggo against

the wall beside me and pointed a sword at his face. “You best mind your manners or we *will* report you to the director.”

Viggo scowled but remained silent.

Once the guards were gone, I heaved a big sigh and addressed Viggo. “I know as much as you do, I expect.”

He shook his head and practically spat the word, “Liar!”

A flare of anger made me lower my voice. “Do I look like an accomplice? We both knew he was unhappy here. We both knew he wanted to leave. His last words to me—” I cursed the tears that overwhelmed me.

Viggo’s scowl became slightly less severe at the sight of me rubbing my eyes.

I forced myself to continue. “His last words to me were a lie. He said it would take him several more weeks to escape.”

“That’s what he told me.” Viggo cleared his throat at my look of surprise and reverted to scowling. “He refused to tell me the details of his plans, but promised he wouldn’t leave without notice.”

I sighed and shoved a hand into my pocket. I’d taken the note out from under my mattress that morning, as if carrying Bryn’s last words would keep him near. “In return for tending to my back after the whipping post, he asked me to give you this.” I held out the envelope.

Viggo snatched it so fast my fingers tingled. He tore the envelope apart, unfolded the paper, and read. I should have left him alone with his friend’s message but I couldn’t make myself go. I watched his face as he drank in the words. He chewed on the inside of his cheek when he neared the end.

“What does it say?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“He wants us to meet him at his mother’s old herbal store after graduation,” Viggo said. “He says this isn’t goodbye forever, only goodbye for now. He’s convinced the three of us will be able to live and work together again someday. But until then, he… he wants us to look out for each other.” Viggo stared at the words, his grip on the page tightening. Then he took a deep, shuddering breath and refolded the letter. Shoved it back into its envelope. He lowered his gaze, frowning.

It was a good thing I didn’t expect a thank you because he didn’t give me one. He walked away from me with his head bowed, shoving the envelope into the front of his jerkin.

“Asta?”

I lowered the cold slab of meat from my eye and looked up from my lunch to see a group of young men standing at my table. Rainer, Frode, and Brandt were among them. The other three I recognized from my Battle Strategy and Weaponry classes. They cast nervous

glances around the Feasting Hall.

Rainer flashed me a smile. “Can we join you?”

I could feel Viggo glaring at the back of my head. I looked over my shoulder at his table. Asger and the other two were trying to engage Viggo in conversation and were failing. He hadn’t spoken to me since that morning. I assumed he still blamed me for Bryn’s departure.

I tore my eyes away from his fiery gaze and smiled at Rainer. “Of course.”

My guards refused to give up their positions on either side of me so the men sat across from me and dug into their fish.

“How did that happen?” Frode asked, nodding at my swollen eye. He had a concerned crease on his brow that caught me off guard.

I pressed the meat against my face, embarrassed. “It was an accident.”

Brandt smirked. “And here I was prepared for a heroic story.”

The others whose names I didn’t know chuckled and nodded as if they had expected the same.

“I’m afraid the tales our peers have spread about me are incorrect.”

“Only slightly,” Rainer said around a mouthful of rice. “I told my friends of our victory in Battle Strategy last night and heard the retelling of it at breakfast. It wasn’t very far from the truth.”

I rolled my eyes. “Good to know.”

“Come now,” Brandt said. “Tell us how you marred your face. It was perfectly fine when we grappled this morning.”

Just yesterday Brandt was determined to be a mute. I wondered what had changed as I explained what had happened during Breaking and Entering class. “Our instructor set up wooden walls of different heights around the room in sort of a maze pattern. All the lights were turned off except for four search lights. We were instructed to sneak from wall to wall and reach the other side of the maze without being caught by the lights. Bags of paint would be catapulted to us if we were.”

The young men snickered and shared knowing glances, as if they too had been forced to do this exercise in the past.

“I hunched down behind a wall when a search light swung my way, not realizing that another man was already crouched there. There was only room for one person behind that wall so we grappled for it. I received an elbow to the face. He received a mouthful of paint.”

The young men laughed.

“Don’t lock horns with Asta unless you want to lose,” one said good-naturedly. As if he had known me all his life.

“I’m sorry to hear about your friend,” Frode said. “I didn’t know Brynjar but, if he was brave enough to befriend you before the rest of us, he must have been a good man.”

The others nodded, suddenly solemn.

I blinked in surprise. “Thank you. That’s kind of you to say.”

“Do you know how he escaped?” asked a man with brown hair and a dimpled chin. “There are rumors that he poisoned the security guards.”

I shook my head. “Bryn would never harm anyone.”

“They say he broke into the safe and destroyed his file,” a man with a shaved head said. “How could he have done that?”

“I…”

They waited for my response, leaning forward eagerly, as if hungry for the facts. Ready to spread the word. Understanding made the food in my mouth taste sour. These men weren’t here to socialize with the female protégé. They just wanted a new story to gossip about.

I swallowed my rice and addressed my plate. “I don’t want to talk about Bryn anymore.”

“But no one in the history of this academy has been able to escape,” the young man with the dimpled chin said. “If you know the details—”

I glared at him. “I know as much as you do.”

A warning glance from Rainer persuaded the dimpled chin man to drop the matter. He averted his glum gaze and lowered his voice. “I’m sorry if I upset you. I was only curious.”

I rose from my seat, taking my plate with me. “Excuse me. I’ve suddenly lost my appetite.” I walked away, despite their protests and apologies.

I was rubbing Bryn’s pungent muscle relaxant into my legs later that evening when I heard Viggo stomping down the hall toward my room. I knew it was Viggo because men greeted him as he passed and he grunted in reply. He stopped before my door and waited. I watched the shadows his feet made through the gap under the door, wondering why he was here and what he wanted. My guard asked him the same thing.

“What does it look like?” Viggo snapped, silencing any further questions. Then he stood there and waited.

I finished rubbing the ointment into my feet, and had pulled on my lounging trousers before he finally sighed. “Are you all right, Asta?”

“I’m fine. Why do you ask?” I muttered, knowing he could hear me.

“Because you didn’t come to dinner and Bryn would be concerned.”

“So?” I demanded, scowling at the door.

He spoke as if through gritted teeth. “So I’m honoring my friend’s wishes by taking an interest in your well-being.”

I rolled my eyes. “How noble.”

“Were those men bothering you?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” I capped the jar of ointment and stored it in my chest of drawers.

“Those men who came to you at lunch like flies to a carcass,” Viggo said impatiently. “Were they hassling you?”

“And what would you do if they were? Threaten to break their bones? Make them swear to never come near me again? I can take care of myself, Viggo.”

“Yes, I can see that. Your fleeing-from-confrontation strategy scared them enough to make them stay away for good.”

I leapt to the door and yanked it open. “I wasn’t—”

Viggo’s brown hair was still wet from showering. The three buttons of his white shirt were undone, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He carried a tray of food in his strong hands. His trousers were rolled up to his knees, exposing hairy and muscular calves. His feet were bare.

“Fleeing.” I looked away and hoped he couldn’t hear my heart fluttering. Of course, I had to realize he was handsome at the precise moment I was trying to be angry and indignant.

He smirked. “What? Have you never seen a man’s forearms?”

I took the tray of food and retreated to my desk with a huff.

Viggo took a deep breath. “Is that Bryn’s muscle relaxant I smell?”

“Yes, he gave me a jar.”

“Oh, is that all?” he said with a chuckle. “You should see my chest of drawers. He stocked it with every one of his concoctions just last week.”

I turned away from my desk to see his smile slowly fading. As if he were only now realizing why Bryn had so dutifully supplied him with medicine.

Viggo picked at invisible lint on his shirt. “When I said he was worrying too much, he jokingly stated that he wouldn’t always be around to patch me up. But he wasn’t joking. He knew. Even then, he knew.”

“He thought you would try to stop him.”

Viggo’s head snapped up.

I shrugged. “When I confronted him about the letter, he said he thought you would try to stop him if he attempted to say goodbye in

person."

Hurt coursed through those copper eyes for a moment before he bowed his head. He forced a snort. "Yes, perhaps I would've tried. But in the end he would've still left, the determined bastard. I'll wring his neck when we see him again but, for now, I hope he's happy." He shuffled his feet for a moment before scowling at me. "You can't hide in this room and sulk forever. Bryn wouldn't approve." Then he marched down the hall.

I ran to the door and leaned out to call after him. "Thank you for dinner!"

He vanished around the corner.

Chapter Eight

I woke in time to avoid being punched in the face. One moment I was asleep, and the next my eyes were open and I was throwing myself out of bed. The fist sank into the pillow and hit the headboard with a muffled *thunk*. I scrambled to my feet and backed into the corner of my room. It took my eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. He was burly and tall, my attacker. I caught the sounds of a scuffle right outside my door.

"This is your brilliant plan?" I asked with an uneasy chuckle. "Your friends distract the guards so that anyone who wakes up will be too preoccupied with them to wonder about me? You're a fool."

"A fool who's about to bring Dotharr's Miracle into submission," the brute said with a savage smile. "In more ways than one."

My innards seized up in a kind of terror I could only associate with *The Great Disaster*. It made me furious. Heat spread down the length of my body. "You don't even know me. I have done nothing to deserve your hate, you slow, disgusting, waste of space." I kicked off the wall and swung a fist across his jaw.

He stumbled back in surprise and shook his head hard.

"Get out of my room!" I screamed as I pelted him with punches.

He recovered quickly and lifted his fists to protect himself. I aimed a kick to his torso and then lunged to my bed for the dagger stored under the mattress. He grabbed the back of my nightshirt and threw me into the opposite wall. The world became white for a moment as pain blossomed around my head. I didn't have time to collapse, much less scream. He pressed his body against mine, pinned my wrists to the wall, and kissed me.

I bit his lip and he reared back with a shout. He released one of my wrists to slap me, and I used the opportunity to gouge his eye. I forced him back and away from me by pushing my finger deeper into his socket. His screams made my head pound but I didn't relent. I shoved a finger into his other eye and pressed down, forcing him to his knees.

The door burst open beside me and I was tackled into my writing desk by one of my attacker's friends. I rolled onto the floor. Three more entered my already-crowded room and joined the first in kicking me before I could get up. I covered my head a moment too late. A foot connected with my nose and blood filled my mouth.

Suddenly, it all stopped. I dared to peek from the shelter of my arms to see Viggo throwing one of the young men out into the hallway. He kicked a second man in the chest and sent him into the wall, then spun to face the third one, threw two jabs at the man's face,

and put a knee in his groin. The fourth was boxed in the ears and had his legs kicked out from underneath him. Viggo spotted me on the floor and froze. His nostrils flared. He turned very slowly and proceeded to kick the man whom I'd made blind.

He was still kicking him when my guards stormed into the room. Viggo stopped and threw his hands in the air. "An amazing job protecting Dotharr's Miracle, gentlemen. You make our Heavenly Master proud!"

"We were ambushed," my guard sputtered in fear or anger, I couldn't tell which.

"Yes, by *trainees*!" Viggo shouted. "You're supposed to have graduated from this academy. You're supposed to have seen battle across the sea. You were chosen for this assignment for a reason, weren't you? You're a disgrace! Get out of here—you're fired."

The second guard loomed over Viggo. "Only General Halvar and the director have the power to dismiss us."

"Get out," Viggo said softly, "or I'll make you."

I struggled to stand, sure Viggo was about to be pummeled.

Instead, the second guard turned to his peer. "You heard the princeling. We're no longer needed here. Let's go home." He spat in Viggo's face. Then he and his partner lumbered away.

Viggo twisted around to glare at me. "Stop cowering and help me dispose of these mongrels."

"How?" I asked.

Viggo nodded at the window. "How else?"

I blanched. "We're on the third story."

Viggo frowned at me. "It's either this, or I'm removing some of their fingers. Which will it be?"

Viggo sat at my table during breakfast. So did Rainer, Frode, Brandt, Asger, and the other two whose names I still didn't know.

Rainer jumped from his seat and apologized as soon as he caught sight of me. "We didn't mean yesterday's lunch to become an interrogation. If you don't want to talk about Bryn, you don't have to," he said in a rush.

I addressed my tray of food. "Thanks." I was going to sit across from Viggo, but he snagged my sleeve and yanked me down to the spot next to him before I could. I winced when my bottom hit the seat and the impact jolted pain across my body. He immediately released me with a murmured apology.

No one spoke for a long time. The men around me avoided my eyes and strived to put as much food in their mouths as they could. I didn't know whether I should feel gratitude or shame.

Frode cleared his throat. "Where are your guards this morning,

Asta?"

"You all heard what happened last night," Viggo said. "Don't feign ignorance."

The silence returned.

"They say Pekka's been sent home," Asger said gruffly. "Asta did serious damage to his eyes. His vision might never be the same again."

"Serves him right," Rainer said. "I don't know what he was thinking."

"Are you going to be all right, Asta?" Brandt asked. "Did they hurt you very badly?"

I blinked away tears. "Yes. I mean, no. I'll be fine. Thank you."

Brandt walked with me to our first class after breakfast. He was careful with me during our grappling session for which I was grateful. We talked mostly. He told me that Dotharr had changed the color of his eyes after a psychotic bully from his former school had tortured him with pieces of glass. I empathized, but didn't say why. He shrugged away my sympathy and simply said he had gotten his revenge once his senses had been heightened by the Heavenly Master of Warriors. He didn't regret what had happened to him. He thought it had been necessary in order to prove his worth to Dotharr. I would have protested if I weren't so impressed with his maturity.

We had a quiz in Religious Studies, which I failed. All the names of the Heavenly Masters blurred together in my mind, even with the distinguishing feature I had written beside their names in my notes. Despite my hatred of the subject, I knew I had to do better. My victories in my other classes didn't mean I could afford to fail in this course.

My Weaponry instructor let me spar with every kind of ax, mace, and maul he had before declaring I was ready to advance. My frustrated and defeated opponents nursed their bruises while my instructor gave me a new building and classroom number. I walked into the intermediate Weaponry class to see Viggo in the middle of a fight. He had a shield strapped onto his arm and wielded a polearm—a brother of the spear with a longer, jagged blade at the end. He dominated his opponent. When he saw me watching, he did a double take and received a shield to the face. He roared and attacked more viciously.

I was paired up with someone of my stature, and handed a polearm and shield. I struggled with the shield. Not only was it heavy but I was unaccustomed to having both hands full. And every injury I'd sustained the night before had been made worse due to my earlier sparring.

My partner defeated me.

Viggo approached me at the end of the class to demand what I was doing there even though it was quite obvious. He scoffed and said there must be some mistake. To which I responded with a scowl and my fleeing-from-confrontation strategy.

Frode sat with me during Arithmetic, murmuring his own commentary while the instructor taught up front. Frode elaborated on things the instructor didn't. His words seemed to open my mind in such a way that, when I looked down at the assignment, I understood what was being asked of me. I was so thankful I could have kissed him.

We were shown how to scale a tower made out of stone and gravel during Breaking and Entering class. In the first few attempts, we were allowed to use ropes and hooks. During the last half hour of the class, however, our instructor took our aids away and watched us struggle to climb without them. It wasn't just the climbing we were being graded on, but the stealth and speed with which we accomplished our goal. I was successful in scaling the tower, but was docked points because of the broken window, the new injuries I gained, and the string of profanities I hissed during my attempt.

I complained about this during lunch, but received no sympathy.

"You'll alert the enemy archers of your presence if you can't scale a wall without making noise," Viggo said with a roll of his eyes. "Your instructor is strict because he's trying to save your life."

He was right, of course, but I didn't voice this aloud.

An hour of notes on Holger's government later, and I was in Battle Strategy, my favorite class. It was my team's turn to defend the castle keep. Our commander was terrified and couldn't think of a sound defensive strategy, so Rainer and I took over. Since leaving the strongest fighters in the keep hadn't worked for the opposing team, we didn't assume it would work for us. We divided the team in half. Rainer led the half that defended the gatehouse and I stayed behind with those guarding the keep. I shouted words of encouragement to the archers and gave commands to those who were unsure of their positions on the ground. My team dispersed at the end of the hour, victorious once again.

While learning about the battles Holger had fought in centuries past, I couldn't help but wonder if my parents would be proud. I was fraternizing with the enemy. Graduates from this academy were destined to join the general in his crusade, work for the king, or become law enforcement here on the island. If my parents were alive, would they be able to look at these young men and see innocence? Or would they lump these warriors-in-training in with General Halvar? I was training to become a Defender. Despite my plans to use my new knowledge to avenge them, would my mother and father approve of

what I was learning? Would they even approve of my plans to kill the general and the king whose orders he was carrying out? I honestly didn't know. But I knew I wouldn't be at peace unless I saw my mission through.

There were no longer any trampolines in Acrobatics class. We were expected to perform back flips without them. Swinging padded mallets were installed above the tightrope. Needless to say, it was even harder to walk back to the living quarters that evening. I sat in a shower cubicle and let the hot water pour over my battered body while everyone else went to dinner. Then I lathered myself in more muscle relaxant and lay in bed, unwilling to move and agitate my fatigued muscles. Viggo came knocking at the door with another tray of food.

"If you make this a habit, I'll stop bringing you dinner," he muttered after I had snatched the tray from him. "I'm not your servant."

"I'm eternally in your debt," I said around a strip of chicken.

Viggo rolled his eyes and left.

A routine soon developed. I ate with my friends, gave my all during my lessons, tried not to think about Kenshore and my family, and missed Bryn in the quiet hour before bedtime. I didn't have any more unwanted visitors. The young men who still disapproved of my presence at the academy resorted to glaring and muttering about me under their breath. Viggo was more of a grudging babysitter than a friend, but I soon became grateful for his company because he was the only person I could talk to about Bryn. He was a constant reminder that we would graduate someday and see our mutual friend again.

The director never confronted me again. He called Viggo into his office once but didn't unearth new information about his son. He left the grounds for a few days to conduct a search, only to return alone and with no new information concerning Bryn's whereabouts. For that both Viggo and I were glad. No news was better than bad news.

Every day I grew stronger. Soon my sharp senses and quick reflexes were no longer a burden. By the end of the month, I was given a new name. It was without my consent and I chafed when I first heard of it, but my fellow warriors-in-training seemed determined to make me a part of their academy's tradition. So I let them.

PART II
DEFENDER

Chapter Nine

It rained on graduation day. The sand pit became a mud pit. My peers sat in their elevated stone benches, muttering about the cold and anxiously waiting for the fight to begin. Viggo loomed even from the other side of the pit. We hadn't started yet because we were still waiting for our guests of honor: General Halvar and King Torvald. I was told they had arrived earlier today to witness the grapple matches of the other candidates for King's Defender. I supposed they had stepped out of the coliseum to discuss what they saw.

I grinned at Viggo. He couldn't forgive himself for graduating on the same day as I was. He'd been certain he would leave the academy before me, but I had worked hard to advance quickly, pushing myself beyond my limits so that I would complete the program in time to graduate with his same group of warriors instead of the ones predicted to graduate in five months' time. Despite the many classes we had come to share over the past year, I had never wrestled with him. The instructors were prudent about pairing up grapplers who were of similar size and build. But today was different. As a nominee for King's Defender, I had to prove my worth against a seemingly stronger and more skilled opponent. I was a little nervous, but mostly excited. Viggo wouldn't make winning easy.

I brushed the wet strands of hair from my face then pulled the cord out of my hair entirely. Re-braiding the soaking wet tresses was difficult, but I couldn't afford to have it falling into my face when the fight began. Despite Viggo and my instructors' suggestions, I had kept my hair long. In a sea of close-cropped, spiky, and even shaven heads, I was determined to be different.

My eyes strayed to the topmost tier of the coliseum. The rain and the distance didn't hinder my sharp vision. A tent had been set up for the director, the general, and the king before the sky had opened up and poured down gallons of water over us. There were cushions arrayed over the protected benches and refreshments on short wooden tables waiting for our guests. The director sat leaning back against the cushions, but his bouncing knee betrayed his nerves.

General Halvar strode onto the tier with three men in tow, drawing everyone's attention. He looked very much the same with his black hair, beard, and mustache—covering the unburned side of his face—crisp uniform, and shiny black boots. I felt the weight of his cold, mismatched eyes even from forty yards below. I shuddered. Even if he were an honorable man it would be difficult to meet his gaze.

Beside him stood a young man about my age with dark hair and a simple crown made of glass. His eyes were such a dark blue, they

resembled sapphire gemstones. He wore a white uniform, similar to the general's only lacking the medals, and carried a ceremonial sword. When he reached up to tug on his collar, I saw he was wearing white gloves. I would have thought him a proud, pampered prince if it wasn't obvious how uncomfortable he was in the getup.

This was the mastermind holding the general's leash? This man was supporting the crusade that resulted in the deaths of my family? It seemed improbable, but still hatred pooled into my chest like hot oil.

The general, the director, and the king sat on their cushioned seats and turned their attention to the mud pit below. The remaining two men stood at the entryway.

The director raised his voice to be heard across the coliseum. "Begin!"

I gave Viggo my undivided attention. It was time.

"Bring him down, Isa!" I heard Rainer shout.

Isa; strong-willed. That was what they called me now.

"Don't let her defeat you, Viggo!" Asger's deep voice rumbled. "Remember her right kick is strongest."

"Show him your strength, Iron Maiden!" Brandt shouted.

I made a face in his general direction.

Viggo rolled his shoulders and held his hands out, his eyes focused intently on me. His clothes clung to him, showing every line of his torso through his white, now transparent, shirt. I wondered for a brief, terrifying moment if he could see my shape as clearly. Then I remembered it didn't matter. Viggo didn't see me as woman. I was the tiresome child he had been left with and couldn't help but feel responsible for.

We began to circle each other. We would grapple without weapons first. If the fight dragged on past five minutes, daggers would be thrown into the pit. If the fight lasted another five minutes, swords would be added to the mix.

I pretended to rush him but he didn't flinch. I smirked and kicked a glob of wet sand at his face. He ducked to avoid it and I tackled him while he was unaware. Or, at least, I thought he was unaware, but he was ready for me. He stepped to the side—quick, strong arms wrapping around my waist. He used my momentum to spin me around and toss me. I flew across the pit and fell onto the soggy ground on my hands and knees. The sand bit into my palms.

I rolled to avoid Viggo's heel, which had been aimed at my back. A quick swipe kick to his ankles sent him sprawling to the ground beside me. I pounced. His hands closed around my throat. I gripped both sides of his open collar and yanked them across each other. We wriggled in the sand for a moment, each trying to choke out the other. Neither would relent so we were eventually forced to release each

other, much to the crowd's disappointment.

We leapt to our feet, shook off the wet sand from our arms and legs, and tried to catch our breaths. Viggo's hands went up again, ready. I pretended to pick the sand out of my hair. He charged at me. Instead of going for his waist, I stopped him from reaching me by slapping both hands against his biceps. A knee to the stomach made him double over and I curled my arm around his neck. He was in my grasp for less than a minute before he flipped me over his back and slammed me into the ground.

I had time to take in a short, raspy breath before he kicked me in the side. I rolled several times in my attempt to escape his swinging foot, tasting sand and eventually blood. Once on my feet again, I noticed a dagger had been thrown into the pit. Viggo lunged for it but I lunged for him. A kick to the back of the head sent him sprawling onto his stomach. I snatched the dagger. He leapt to his feet and spun around.

Again we faced off, but this time, I had a weapon. I proceeded to jab at his chest and stomach, striking so fast my hand was a blur. He moved faster still, evading the blade. He blocked one of my thrusts, gripped my wrist, and cuffed me across the face with his free hand. I managed to wrench my hand free after he had punched me twice more, but by then the damage was done. My head spun. I swung the dagger, blinking furiously to clear my head and vision. The dagger sliced his fist when he attempted to hit me again. I felt it connect, then heard him hiss. The sound of his pain helped me focus. My vision cleared in time to see him shaking his hand out to the side, blood sprinkling over the sand. He circled around me again, wary.

I coughed and spat blood. My side ached. For a moment, I worried he had broken one of my ribs. It hurt to breathe but I was still standing—perhaps it wasn't too severe. My face seemed to have its own pulse. The knowledge that my eyes would soon start to swell made me panic. I had to end this quickly before my vision was even more impaired. I flipped the knife over in my hand, gripped the sharp end, and made as if to fling it at him. He ducked, and that's when I hurled my weapon.

The knife embedded in his thigh. His shout of pain was cut off by the side kick I dealt to his head. It was the right kick each one of my opponents had come to fear. He staggered to his knees and threw up into the sand. I walked around him and his vomit, grabbed a fistful of his hair, and yanked him back against me. It was easy to get a decent hold around his neck this time. I squeezed until he tapped my arm.

"Warriors!" the director bellowed. "The victor of this scrimmage is Isa!"

I glanced up in surprise as cheers echoed throughout the

coliseum. I had forgotten about our audience. I released Viggo and knelt before him. His glowing eyes were half-lidded, his mouth partially open and still smeared with vomit.

"Viggo," I said. "Are you all right? Did I kick you too hard? Say something."

"I'm…" He squeezed his eyes closed and caught himself mid-sway. "I'm all right."

"Open your eyes. I have to see your eyes."

Finally, I received an irritated look and a frown. "I'm fine, Asta. I just need a moment to collect my scrambled brains."

I laughed, relief flooding through me. "I'm sorry about your leg. Does it hurt? Here, let me—"

Viggo caught my hands before I could touch the blade's handle. "Enjoy your victory. I can take care of myself."

I bit my lip, uncertain. He shoved me aside then. I was forced to stand or topple over, so I stood and faced my peers.

General Halvar rose, drawing all eyes to himself. The smile he gave made me shiver. "Well done, Isa. Well done indeed. Now, kill him."

The rain beating against the stone was the only sound in the coliseum. If I looked around I knew I would see shock, horror, outrage, maybe even anger. They were the emotions that coursed through me. Worst of all was Viggo's reaction. He pulled the dagger from his thigh and held it out to me without a word.

I gave him an incredulous look. "Have you lost your mind? I'm not going to kill you!"

"You must," he rasped. "If you're going to be the King's Defender, he has to know you can kill."

I looked up at King Torvald. His brow was wrinkled in skepticism, and his gaze shifted between me, Viggo, and General Halvar.

How could he send his feral dog of a general overseas to murder innocent people, but he can't seem to stomach the thought of someone being slain in his presence? I thought with annoyance. Still, the king's indecision was advantageous.

I took the dagger and leapt onto the first level of seating. My peers made space for my landing as I jumped from tier to tier. Finally, my soggy boots thudded against the cement floor before the general. I straightened and took a moment to catch my breath. He met my harsh gaze with a coolness that told me his anger was bubbling just below the surface. There was a time when such a look would have made me cower and retreat. There was a time when pain would follow the giving of that expression. Even after all this time, fear still threatened to paralyze me. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to meet his gaze.

I'm not his prisoner anymore. I'm not the helpless damsel he stole from

Kenshore and dragged across the sea. I will never be afraid of him again.

I walked around the general and knelt before the king.

"What are you doing?" the director asked. "You don't have permission to—"

I addressed the king's boots. "My lord, this academy has taught me every possible way to kill a man. I'm quick, resourceful, and efficient. Ask any of my peers. But that man in the pit is my friend. He has trained alongside me this year. Above all else, he's innocent. I won't… I *refuse* to slay him for General Halvar's entertainment."

I looked into the eyes of the king, and was shocked to see kindness. Such a fierce kindness I hadn't seen since Bryn had tended to my injuries.

"I won't force you to murder your friend," he said, his voice soft as velvet.

"Sire," the general said. "She has disobeyed orders. She must be punished."

"Ten lashings with the cat-of-nine-tails should teach her some respect," Director Endre said, eager to please.

The king rose. "If she is to be my Defender, she will follow orders from me, Halvar."

The general's jaw clenched. He bowed stiffly and said, "Yes, sire."

It was almost too perfect. I had a dagger in my hand and the two men responsible for the destruction of my town standing before me. I glanced at the guards at the door. I would have approximately ten seconds to act before they could apprehend me. I glanced at the director. He was closer. He would be the one to kill me.

Fear pricked my chest, and the anger and grief I felt over my family were momentarily cast aside. When had I come to fear death? Hadn't I wished it at one point? Gripping the dagger more tightly, I knew I should strike now. When would I have such an opportunity again? The king stood before me, and the general was still bowing… But in the end, I would only have time to strike down one enemy and I couldn't force myself to choose.

King Torvald's face softened when he looked at me again. "Rise a Defender."

I did. The director handed me a plaque with the academy's crest —a sword piercing a round shield with an eagle perched on top. I reached out to take it as if in a daze. It was cold to the touch. I looked up at the director when he refused to release it.

"Do you swear on your life and your honor to protect His Majesty the King?" Director Endre asked somewhat grimly.

I opened my mouth to speak, but paused, eyes flickering to Torvald. He stood patiently and watched the exchange, hands clasped before him. He seemed… happy. For me or for himself, I couldn't tell.

“Do you swear on Dotharr’s great name that you will think of the king’s best interests at all times?” the director asked before I could reply. “That you will behave yourself with the utmost efficiency, decency, and respect that is befitting a servant of our nation’s leader?”

I tore my gaze away from the king. “I—”

“And do you swear by the skies themselves that no matter what forces threaten you or what circumstance you find yourself in, you will defend the king until your final breath?” Director Endre demanded. “Do you so swear?”

I swallowed hard and stared down at my shiny plaque. I gripped it until my fingers hurt. “I so swear.”

Finally satisfied, Endre released the plaque. “Then as the director of this fine institution, I declare you top graduate and King’s Defender. You are free to leave and begin your new life. Make us proud, Isa.” He clapped me on the back.

“Do excuse me,” I said before the king could speak. “I must tend to my friend.”

The king nodded. “The general and I have some business to discuss with the director, but I’ll send my chauffeur to your living quarters. He’ll take you to the royal hill when you’re ready.”

I bowed hastily and fled.

Chapter Ten

Despite his complaints, I followed Viggo to his room. I wasn't convinced he was completely well. He ran a hand over his face and flinched, as if he were only now remembering he had attempted to punch through my dagger.

"Does it hurt very much?" I couldn't help but ask.

He gave me a dark look. "I'm fine. Will you stop hovering about like a concerned mother hen?"

I crossed my arms and leaned against the doorframe. "If I appear concerned it's because most of the blood in the sand pit was yours."

"Yes, and the vomit," he murmured, riffling through his chest of drawers for some medicine.

It suddenly occurred to me that he was embarrassed. My mouth fell open. "Viggo, don't be ashamed! You performed admirably."

He snorted as he uncapped a jar of pale gray ointment. "I let you win."

I scowled. "Don't say that or I might believe you."

Viggo dipped a finger into the jar and spread some of the foul-smelling potion on his injured hand. "And if it were true?"

"Then I would no longer respect you."

"All right, Asta. Cool your temper." He sighed, averting his gaze. "Despite both of us being nominees, there could be only one victor today. I decided it was going to be you."

This was news to me. I assumed I'd been paired up with him because he was bigger, stronger, and better at grappling than most of the young men at the academy. "You were also a candidate for King's Defender? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Defenders are chosen once a year," Viggo said. "When I enrolled in the academy, I was convinced that I would be chosen. Then General Halvar brought in the first woman and outsider to be blessed by Dotharr, and suddenly the tides turned. Woman or not, you were still a miracle. You excelled despite everyone's skepticism, and I hated you for that. Then Bryn ran away, left behind that damned note, and changed everything."

He raked a hand through his hair. "Three months ago, the director finally told me I was being considered as a candidate along with three others. I didn't know who the others were, but I knew you had to be one of them. When they threw us into the coliseum together… I knew to put my own wishes above yours would prove I valued the position more than I valued my friend." He shook his head. "And I couldn't do that."

For a moment, I was touched. But then my outrage returned.

“This was your graduation day too. You should have fought your hardest and let the decision be made fairly. Better yet, Director Endre should have paired us up with different people so that our friendship wouldn’t influence the outcome.”

“Perhaps this is my punishment for not being more helpful in recovering Bryn. Endre led me to believe I had a chance and then forced me to give up what I wanted. It’s brilliant, when you think about it.” Viggo frowned. “Do you suppose General Halvar asked each nominee to murder their opponent?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” I said with a scoff. “He’s barbaric enough. But Endre wouldn’t sacrifice two perfectly good warriors simply because they lost a match. The victors must have been stopped before they could administer the killing blow because they had proved their obedience.”

“If that was the case, why were you given the position? You refused to obey.”

I sighed and grudgingly murmured, “Because the king was kind enough to spare my friend.”

“And in the end, the king always has the final word.” Viggo retrieved a jar of white paste from his drawer of medicines and held it out to me. “We were lucky he was in a favorable mood. Put this around your eyes. It’ll keep the swelling down.”

I swiped the jar from him. “You should go to the director and demand a rematch with an opponent you’ve never met. It’s only fair. Most, if not all, of your instructors thought you worthy of the position or they wouldn’t have nominated you. You and I are not the only ones who believe you deserve to be a Defender.” I applied the paste around my eyes. “Endre’s meeting with the king as we speak. Perhaps the king will be on your side if his good mood has lasted.”

Viggo rolled his shoulders and neck, and winced. “Can’t you simply rejoice in your victory?”

I capped the jar and tossed it at him. “A victory is earned, not given.”

“We’ll grapple another time, Asta,” Viggo said, catching the jar with ease, “and we’ll see who the true victor is then. Would that satisfy you?”

“Perhaps.” I chewed on the inside of my cheek. “Tell me again, what do you know about the king?”

My friend shrugged. “He’s professional whenever he addresses the people. He’s proven to treat his subjects kindly when they bring their petitions before him. At the island’s anniversary celebrations, he’s cordial to anyone who approaches him no matter what their status is.”

“But the face he puts on for his people could be an act,” I said. “Are you sure there has never been talk of him mistreating his

servants? Any rumors about his actions on the royal hill that would hint at there being… malice in him?"

Viggo rolled his eyes. "How many times must we go over this? By all accounts, King Torvald is a good man. Why are you so intent on finding fault in him?"

Because General Halvar murdered everyone I cared about and tortured me for fun, I wanted to say. *And I can't believe the king is not involved somehow*. The general simply couldn't be so smart and sneaky as to deceive his king completely and without suspicion. But he had managed to fool everyone else in this country into believing he was honorable. I couldn't bring myself to break Viggo's illusion of the perfect hero.

"I'm simply struggling with the concept of such a man," I said instead. "No one is *that* good."

"You've been hired to be his shadow. I'm sure you'll find out the truth about his character," Viggo said. "You'll be leaving for the hill soon. Prepare yourself."

"How exactly am I supposed to do that? I don't have anything to pack." I gestured down to my feet. "Even the boots I'm wearing aren't mine!"

Viggo smirked. "You could bathe. You look like you were forced to sleep with the swine."

He stood when someone came marching down the hall. I turned. It was one of King Torvald's guards, dressed in a special kind of armor. It resembled the chest and back protectors we wore in our Battle Strategy class, only this guard was completely covered in plates of different shapes and sizes corresponding to the body part being protected. He also carried a pouch that looked and sounded suspiciously like a coin purse.

He stopped before the open door and nodded respectfully. "There you are, Lady Isa. I am Samir. I will be your chauffeur this afternoon. The king has been made aware that you have no possessions of your own. While he eats with the director and the general, he requests I take you into the city so that you can purchase shoes, clothing, and anything else you might need. We are to meet him at the hill at dusk."

"What's to stop her from stealing the money and escaping you?" Viggo asked, much to my surprise. "You saw her in the pit. She could easily overpower you."

Samir's mouth twitched. "I am to be her chauffeur. Her escort will follow us in their own carriages."

I winked conspiratorially at Viggo. "Carriages. As in plural. That means they're safe."

He scoffed. "No one is safe from you now that you're free."

I am *free, aren't I? He and I both*. I smiled at my chauffeur. "Would

you be so kind as to wait downstairs? I'll bathe and join you shortly."

Samir nodded and retreated down the hall. When I turned to Viggo, his countenance had changed. His glowing eyes were fixed on the window and his face was closed, as if he refused to become emotional. "I suppose this is goodbye then."

I punched his arm. "Not yet. We still have to meet Bryn at his mother's former herb store. Or have you forgotten?"

Viggo rubbed his upper arm. "How will you manage to get away from your escort?"

I shrugged. "Perhaps I can remember I'm in need of some herbs while on our shopping spree. Would it be my fault if the store we go to just so happened to have closed down while I was in the academy?"

A genuine smile broke across Viggo's purpling face. "I'll meet you there then."

I looked for Brandt, Rainer, and Frode before I left. They had been good friends and supporters this year. I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye. Who knew when I'd see them again? I found them in the Feasting Hall, sitting at our usual table, eating their last meal at the academy. I wouldn't forget them and told them so. They clapped me on the back, shook my hand, and told me how proud they were to know me. I thanked them and wished them luck.

"Look for us in the city when you're able," Rainer said. "We would love to hear about your new life on the royal hill."

Brandt and Frode agreed.

After promising that I would, I made my leave.

I twisted around in my seat as we left Dotharr's Academy. I watched the depressing buildings until we turned the corner. It felt as if I'd only just arrived. And now I was leaving. I turned and faced forward, swallowing hard. Perhaps the academy had been too strict in its punishments, meals, and schedules, but it had helped me grow into my abilities. It had strengthened my body and mind. It had given me goals to accomplish, something else to focus on instead of the loss of my home and family. It had saved my life.

Death was the farthest thing from my mind now. I still wanted to kill General Halvar. I still wanted to put an end to the Quest for Resources and avenge my family. But when I thought about King Torvald, all I could see was the kindness in his eyes.

Viggo's words buzzed around my brain. If Torvald truly was a good man, I couldn't kill him. I knew enough about Holger's politics to know there was a way I could change his mind, however. If I gained his confidence, became his friend, and proved I was capable of giving good advice, he might make me one of his counselors. Then I

could tell him my story and suggest he put an end to the Quest for Resources.

If King Torvald were reasonable, he would listen and consider the opposing view before making a decision. Perhaps I could persuade him to call in some of the general's soldiers, give them truth serum, and ask for their stories. Perhaps we could find another way to gather more natural resources for the people of Holger. Perhaps there was hope for those nations that had yet to be conquered. And after the general was punished for his crimes…

What will become of me?

"Where would you like to go first?" Samir asked.

"I—" I looked down at my clothes, at the lounging shirt and trousers I had been wearing all year. The boots I wore were the ones I had grappled in. I'd tried to clean them up but they were still awfully shabby. I would be embarrassed to appear before anyone of status looking like this. "Clothing store first, please."

I'll worry about accomplishing my plan before I worry about what I'll do afterward, I decided. It felt cowardly, but I honestly had no idea what I would do if I succeeded in my new mission.

While in the academy, I took very little notice of the passing seasons. There had been time for nothing else but training. Now that I was free, I wished it were summer.

In Kenshore, it had gotten warm enough for the fireflies to flourish at night. Even at the center of the town, the songs of the bugs could be heard. During the day, I would force Sylvi to take a break from her drawing and piano-playing to jump into the lake with me. We would dry out under the trees and snack on the golden apples of our neighbor's orchard.

I sighed with longing and looked up at the cloudy skies. *At least it stopped raining.*

Shaking off my nostalgia, I watched the women walking along the sidewalks. I didn't know the fashion of Holger. I had been wearing men's clothing since I arrived. If I were to assimilate into King Torvald's court, then I would need to know the latest fashion. Unfortunately, the women on the sidewalk wore working attire. Seamstresses, bakers, grocery-store aides, schoolteachers, nurses, and bank tellers rushed to get lunch before returning to work. I also spotted several professional governesses in their sleek black skirts, and cream-colored blouses with long sleeves and frills down the front.

There were a handful of women standing outside shops with their delicate parasols in one hand, holding the skirts of their ridiculously big dresses with the other, noses wrinkled in distaste as they waited for their rides to come. They each had a servant or two by their sides, carrying their purchases. I hoped the women in King Torvald's court

weren't as frivolous. Even if they were, I couldn't dress like that. I wouldn't be able to move.

My chauffeur/guard stopped the carriage before the largest dress store on the street. "Go on in and choose what you like." He must have seen the horror on my face because he added, "There's nothing to fear. The seamstresses will take your measurements and coach you through the process. You can have them deliver your purchases to the hill if you like. One of the king's rings is in that pouch. If they doubt who you are or where your money came from, that ring will silence them. We will be patrolling the street."

"We?" I asked, taking a look around. I nodded in understanding when I noticed two more carriages coming up the road, bearing the king's crest. "I see."

"Whistle when you are ready to leave and we will come for you."

I thanked him before climbing out of the carriage. I looked up at the clothing store in trepidation. The dresses displayed in the windows were so fine. The women shopping within the store looked so fancy with their lace bonnets and satin handkerchiefs. I shuffled my feet, scuffing the side of my already well-worn boot against the dirty pavement. I didn't belong here. I took a deep breath and summoned my courage. If I didn't belong in a fancy store dressed like this, I would most certainly not belong in the king's court. I lifted my chin and walked in.

Chapter Eleven

Everyone stared. It was as if they had never seen a pair of trousers before. The women shopping scuttled away as if my unkemptness was contagious. I had no idea what I was supposed to do next. I looked around as discreetly as possible, hoping to gain a clue by watching the other shoppers. I wandered over to the display of dresses and pretended to take a look.

One of the women at the counter hurried over, face pinched in sympathy. “Merciful heavens, child! You’re in desperate need of assistance.”

I laughed shakily. “I suppose I am.”

“Where have you come from?” she asked, looking me up and down. “What are you wearing?”

“I’ve just graduated from Dotharr’s Academy. These are the clothes they gave me.”

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise, but the color of my eyes kept her from questioning me further. “Dotharr choosing a woman to join his anointed… It’s almost cruel. I can’t imagine what you’ve been through, living with those men. No wonder you’re in this state. And that hair!”

I fingered my braid, suddenly defensive. “What’s wrong with my hair?”

She patted me on the shoulder. “It’s in need of some pampering and a good, fashionable cut. But you can arrange that later. You’re here for new clothes.”

I pulled out my coin pouch and dug around inside it. “Yes, now that I’ve graduated I’ve been hired by the king. He gave me some money so that I could buy suitable clothing.” I found the ring and fished it out to show it to her. The golden band had a blue sapphire encased by four prongs. The letter T had been artistically carved into the stone’s surface.

The woman blinked down at it in amazement. “Freedom and a job at the royal hill. How marvelous. Congratulations, child!” She opened her arms to embrace me, but stopped short. She patted my shoulder again. “Come now. My name is Thora and I’ll help you choose your new wardrobe.”

Thora ushered me into one of the changing rooms and measured every part of my body. Then she stripped me to my undergarments and was gone, taking my clothes with her.

“Era, Ragna!” I heard her singsong voice say. “I have another project. I’ll need your assistance.”

“Are you referring to that street urchin who skulked into our

store?" someone sniffed. "You'll be here all day, Mother."

I scowled at the curtain. "I can hear you!"

"She's no street urchin," Thora scolded. "Didn't you see her eyes? She's a warrior, the first female warrior, and she's been hired by King Torvald. We must make her look like a princess. Now, come help me choose some fabrics for her."

"Fabrics will do little to improve her," another girl murmured.

"I can still hear you!" I raised my voice to say.

"Mind your own business," that same voice snapped.

"She's a paying customer," Thora said. "And she'll be treated with the same gracious attention as any other. Not another negative word out of you two or I'll be docking your pay." In a lower tone, she said, "Now, what do you think of this fabric? Wouldn't the purple make her eyes shine?"

"Her eyes already shine," one of the girls whispered. "She's a freak even among her own kind. We shouldn't draw more attention to her."

I yanked the drape aside, causing several women nearby to shriek and skitter away. I stalked over to the seamstresses huddled by the counter. The two who had been mocking me were about my age, but shorter and scrawnier. One's cheekbones were so defined, they could cut through glass. Their perfect blond hair was curled into delicate ringlets. They could have been twins with their matching dresses, hairstyles, and blue eyes. I couldn't understand my sudden hatred for them, but it surged within me. It was an effort not to tear those curls out of their heads. They cowered as I approached.

I addressed Thora. "Since I'm obviously not welcome here, I'll take my business elsewhere."

She shook her head and held out her hands. "Please, forgive my daughters. They're simply jealous of your ability. You see, they have no talent."

Both girls let out cries of outrage. "Mother!"

Thora ignored them. "I'm sorry they've ruined your day, but please don't leave. You can't walk around the city in nothing but your undergarments. Look!" She lifted a roll of purple fabric with small white flowers. "Wouldn't this be lovely against your clear skin?"

I ran a hand over the material, and the action tugged at a memory. I was prancing through the halls of my home in Kenshore in my new dress, feeling like the most beautiful girl in the world. I paraded in front of my father, fanning myself with one of Sylvi's fans. "Mother bought me this dress today. Don't I look beautiful?"

The memory of the fondness in his eyes and his booming laugh made my eyes grow misty.

"Asta; divine beauty. We chose the perfect name."

I smiled despite the pain of remembering. “It’s glorious. Can I buy it all?”

Thora laughed. Her daughters rolled their eyes and shared a look as if to say, “How dense is she?”

“This entire roll will make you several dresses, my dear. I imagine you want some variety in your wardrobe. How about you pick a pattern for this cloth while I look for another kind of fabric? Era, the book.”

The shorter of the two girls bent down behind the counter, then produced a large tome, apparently containing every kind of dress pattern imaginable. I flipped through the pages in awe.

“These are her measurements, Ragna,” Thora said, handing a slip of paper to the other daughter. “Why don’t you look for a dress in the back that will fit Miss…?” She looked at me expectantly.

“Isa,” I said.

She smiled. “Nice to meet you, Miss Isa.”

Ragna snatched the piece of paper from her mother before stomping away.

“I know it’s difficult to think of summer when it’s so chilly out, but be sure to browse through the summer dress section,” Thora said. “And could you be so kind as to return to the dressing room? Some of our customers are looking uncomfortable at the sight of so much skin.”

I looked around, having forgotten I was only dressed in my undergarments. Many ladies were averting their eyes while some of the younger girls openly gawked. I wasn’t embarrassed. Never in a million years could they earn a body like mine. But I took the tome with me to the dressing room out of respect for Thora.

Two hours later, I wore a forest-green dress with a sweetheart neckline and bow on the shoulder. The ruffles along the bottom of the skirt swooped upward and to the side to expose the white petticoats underneath before draping back down ever so gracefully to the ground. Despite Thora’s clucking, I had declined the dress with longer sleeves and bought a white shawl instead. It was chilly, yes, but my strange body could handle it.

I had been given a white lace bonnet for free—to protect my ears from the cold, Thora had said, but I suspected it was also to hide my unfashionable hair. The seamstresses wanted to put me in a corset, but after a year without one I had grown accustomed to being able to take a deep breath. So I had politely declined and opted for a new chemise instead. I still wore my grungy boots but, thankfully, the dress was long enough to cover them. I whistled as loudly as I could and admired my reflection in the store window while I waited for my ride.

It was like looking into the past. For a moment, I could see the old Asta galloping through the fields with Sylvi and Irma close behind, leather riding gloves gripping the reins, dress fabric flapping in the wind. The Asta who attended the town balls in her clean, elegant, white evening gowns and wore her hair in fancy braided up-dos. The Asta who wore her school skirts and blouses proudly. But then I looked into my eyes and remembered the countless hours practicing lethal strikes on dummies. Those glowing copper orbs flashed with a fierceness that the old Asta had never been able to accomplish. Stubbornness, I could pull off easily. But I had never been this… wild and indestructible. It was obvious I wasn't who I once was. I had mixed feelings about that.

My chauffeur/guard stopped by the sidewalk and helped me climb into the carriage. "Where to next? Or is your coin purse too light to make any more purchases?"

"Next to the men's clothing store," I said. "I have to buy clothes for lounging and sneaking."

Samir seemed surprised but didn't comment. "As you wish."

* * *

Three pairs of trousers, three white shirts, two coats, a cloak, a pair of sneaking boots, riding boots, and dancing shoes, four new pairs of undergarments and stockings, and a new haircut later, I was exhausted. So was my escort apparently because Samir grumbled when I mentioned the herb store.

"We have the best doctors and medicine men in Holger living on the royal hill," he said. "There's no need to buy your own herbs."

"This store we're going to belongs to a friend of mine," I said. "I promised I would visit as soon as I graduated, and I intend to keep my word."

"Dusk is nearly upon us," Samir said, as if I couldn't see the failing light and long shadows all around us.

"Then it'll be a quick visit."

He rolled his eyes but finally became silent.

Viggo told me several months back that Bryn's mother's store had been called Olga's Remedies, and that there was a sign hanging over the door with two pale hands and a plant growing between the touching palms. I knew the name of the cross streets and the names of the stores on either side. And still we couldn't find it. We drove up and down the neighborhood four times before I spotted Viggo's glowing eyes in an alley between a mystic's store and a flower shop.

"Stop here," I said, gesturing to the other side of the road.

My chauffeur pointed at the sun. “You have one hour, Lady Isa. Then we must go to the hill.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for your patience.” I leapt from the stagecoach, adjusted my bonnet, and proceeded to cross the street as nonchalantly as possible. I entered the mystic’s store and pretended to browse until I was sure Samir was distracted. Then I slipped out of the store and dashed into the alleyway. “Viggo?” I whispered as loudly as I dared.

Even in the dying sunlight, I could see the brick wall at the end. The alley only contained several crates and two garbage cans. There was no place for Viggo to hide. Where could he have gone? I was considering leaving the alley and continuing to search the neighborhood when the grinding of stone caught my attention. I spun around to see a hidden door in the wall at the end of the alleyway. It slowly slid to the side to reveal my friend.

Chapter Twelve

I let out a sigh of relief, gathered my long skirts, and hurried over.

"Asta?" Viggo said, face scrunched in confusion.

I put my hands on my hips. "Who else would be looking for you?"

He looked me up and down several times, mouth going slack. "I had to be sure. You're so…"

For a moment, I thought he was going to pay me a compliment. My face burst into flames.

Viggo cleared his throat and finally looked away. "Different."

I let out a sigh of relief and shook my head at my own silliness. "What is this? A secret hideout?"

"When we were young, Bryn and I found this door in the wall," he explained, moving aside to let me in. "We used it to escape the boys who bullied him. Olga's store was bought by that mystic sometime after Bryn and I were enrolled in Dotharr's Academy. He isn't in there. I thought he might've come here when he realized how much this neighborhood had changed."

What I'd thought was a hidden room was actually a tunnel, sloping down into the earth. A small lamp hung from the wall, lighting the way even after Viggo had shut the door behind us. I had to suppress the urge to sneeze. It smelled like damp earth and rotting plants. We walked through semi-darkness until we came to another door made of stone.

"What was it originally built for?" I asked.

"I think you'll figure it out once we reach our destination." Viggo pushed on the door and then slid it to the side. It caught on something, forcing Viggo to push harder. With a final grunt, he managed to force the door open.

We walked into what appeared to be an underground wine cellar. The room had been cut from the earth. Barrels of mead and wine were stacked up against one wall, and decks of playing cards, wooden chips, and metal mugs were lined up on a shelf against the back wall. A table and four chairs took up the farthest corner. There Bryn sat, beaming at me. His curly black hair almost reached his shoulders. He wore the white robes of a medical student, the sleeves of which he had rolled up to his elbows, and he was trying to grow facial hair. It made me grin even wider.

He rose at the sight of me and bowed.

Shooting Viggo a look of disapproval, he murmured, "Where are your manners? We're in the presence of a lady."

I covered the distance between us in two bounds and threw my

arms around him.

Viggo scoffed. “A lady wouldn’t come anywhere near you. She might fear the caterpillar on your face is carnivorous.”

I laughed and pulled away to look into Bryn’s eyes. He didn’t seem the least bit upset about Viggo’s comment. He held me at arm’s length. “I think you’ve grown! I can see into your eyes now without looking down.”

I punched him in the arm and almost knocked him over. “You lied to me.”

Bryn regained his balance and rubbed his arm. “I had to. If you knew anything, anything at all, my father would learn of it. I knew about the truth serum. I invented it by accident when I was fifteen and he confiscated my formula. I couldn’t tell you the truth without putting myself and my plans in jeopardy. Surely, you can understand that.”

“Yes, but you still lied,” Viggo chimed in. “That makes you a scoundrel and Asta has every right to be angry with you.”

Bryn hung his head. “I’m sorry.” He peeked up at me, suddenly hopeful. “But I’m excelling in medical school.”

I smiled. “Of course you’re excelling in medical school. You’re a genius.”

We proceeded to sit at the table and talk. I had never seen Viggo so animated. He walked Bryn through everything that had happened to him and me this year. I hardly said two words, but I wasn’t bothered. Viggo had known and loved Bryn for much longer than I had. He didn’t go into detail about today. He simply said we fought and I won, and instead of killing him as I had been ordered to, I convinced the king to spare his life.

Bryn sent me a worshipful look. “Strong-willed indeed. And fearless! The king could have decided to let General Halvar punish you in whatever way he liked for your disrespect.”

“Well, he didn’t,” I said, eager to change the subject. “So what have you been up to for the past year, Bryn? Or do you go by Behnam now?”

The big, bright grin reappeared. “I’m both, just as you are Asta and Isa. Call me what you wish. After I escaped Dotharr’s Academy—”

“How *did* you manage to escape?” Viggo interrupted. “I’ve wondered all year.”

Bryn shrugged. “Bode manages the meals of the staff. I merely distracted him long enough to slip a sleeping draught into the pitcher of tea he was going to deliver to the staff dining room.”

I laughed. “So simple! You should’ve seen how frazzled he was on the night of your escape. He was convinced you were a criminal mastermind.”

“Who’s to say I’m not?” Bryn asked, wiggling his eyebrows. “Anyway, after I escaped I needed to find a place to hide for two weeks while my application was being reviewed by the medical school board. I sent several of my medicinal concoctions to prove my worth along with my academic file and the forged expulsion document, gave the board the address of the mystic’s store, and waited for their acceptance letter. I hid here and checked the letterbox periodically before I received my letter. Then I moved into the lofts of Ishem’s School of Science.”

Passion made his copper eyes burn. “You two would die from the lack of physical activity, but Ishem is amazing! We study herbs and plants and their medicinal properties. We study illnesses, their causes, and their remedies. We study human anatomy and dissect animals. I’ve picked apart a cat’s brain and made its body move even after it has been dead for many days!”

I flinched and Viggo grimaced but Bryn continued, unaware of our discomfort. “I know the reasons why anyone does anything because of my advanced psychology class. We don’t only study physical health, you see. I’m studying mental and emotional health as well. And I love it! Everyone at the school doubted me at first because my eyes glow, but I’m ahead in all my courses. I’m meant to be there. I’m meant to be a doctor.”

Viggo ducked.

I rolled my eyes at him. “Dotharr can’t strike us. We’re underground.”

“It’s a habit,” he murmured, sitting up straight again.

I smiled at Bryn. “I’m glad to hear you’ve found happiness at last. Have you discovered an alternate explanation for the color change of your eyes? Or do you think Dotharr made a mistake?”

Viggo crossed his arms. “Heavenly Masters don’t make mistakes.”

Bryn wasn’t so quick to defend their gods. He pursed his lips and considered his words carefully before answering. “Every warrior that has been supposedly chosen by Dotharr has witnessed or survived great horror, tragedy, or pain. Following a hunch, I traveled to Temple Island and visited Dotharr’s monastery.”

“Temple Island?” I asked.

“It’s a smaller island along our western coast, attached to the main island of Holger by a giant purple bridge. It’s where all the temples of the Heavenly Masters were built so it was called Temple Island.”

“No one is allowed to enter the monastery but the warrior monks,” Viggo said. “Don’t tell me you were foolish enough to walk upon holy ground without their blessing.”

Bryn smiled sheepishly. “All right. I won’t tell you that. Just know

I was able to look through the archives of the first warriors chosen by Dotharr and all those that came after."

Viggo slapped a hand against his forehead and ran it down the length of his frowning face. "You must have a death wish. It's bad enough that you've been defying Dotharr since your eyes began to glow, but this—"

"Don't you want to know what I found?" Bryn asked.

"I do," I said, earning a glare from Viggo.

Bryn grinned, unable to contain his excitement. "Copper eyes are passed down through family lines."

Viggo and I blanched.

"In the genealogy records I found an ancestor of mine, yours, Asger's, Gaige's, Uffe's, Rab's, and two other men I knew from the academy. Our ancestors endured tragic or horrific events, and received a permanent state of alertness and focus as a result."

"Do you mean to tell me that our abilities were triggered by circumstances?" Viggo asked, frowning.

"Events so terrible, so grisly and inhuman, that our bodies needed to become something greater in order to survive," Bryn said with a raised finger. "And because we possessed the same… physical makeup as our ancestors, we were able to transform as they did."

"You can prove this?" Viggo asked, tapping the table with his finger. "You can prove that centuries of religious teachings and inscriptions are wrong?"

Bryn shook his head. "Not yet, but I'll continue searching for ways to prove my theory. I'll find the truth."

Viggo's eyes flickered to my face. "How do you explain Asta's transformation? She isn't of Holger."

"I found a list of warrior monk descendants who migrated to the other nations in the fourth century." Bryn shrugged. "Her family has to be related to one of those descendants."

I had mixed feelings about that statement, but Viggo seemed more troubled than I. He scowled stubbornly down at the table, as if refusing to believe his faith in Dotharr was misplaced.

"Perhaps it was Dotharr who awakened these abilities in us," Bryn said, reaching out to grip his friend's arm. "Perhaps he means to protect us from these awful situations we find ourselves in, but it doesn't mean he has chosen us all to be warriors. The permanent abilities we're given are best used in battle. Centuries ago, the monks who worshiped Dotharr must have realized the value of these abilities and used them to protect their loved ones. As time passed, their teachings were altered into what we believe today; an individual with copper eyes is destined to become a warrior."

"You and Bryn murdered his mother's killer," I said, causing

Viggo to shoot me a glare. “Bryn told me. Such an event changed you both drastically, but Bryn is happy where he is and you thrived in warrior academy. It’s obvious you were destined for different paths. Believe what you want of Dotharr and your Heavenly Masters, but Bryn’s explanation makes sense.”

Viggo’s tense shoulders and rigid expression slowly relaxed. A ghost of a smile pulled at his lips. “It appears I’m overruled.”

“Only in this.” Bryn patted his friend’s arm before releasing him. Then he turned a shrewd smile my way. “So, Lady Isa, what are your plans for the future now that you’ve met King Torvald?”

“She’ll be the best Defender Holger has ever seen and bring her family honor,” Viggo said. “It’s the plan she’s always had.” He shot me an incredulous look when I didn’t agree.

I couldn’t meet his gaze.

“Asta.”

“What?” I murmured.

“That *is* your plan, isn’t it?” Viggo demanded.

Bryn leaned back in his chair and waited.

“When Bryn and I spoke last,” I said slowly. “I intended to murder the king and General Halvar in order to end the Quest for Resources.”

My declaration was met with shocked silence. Then Viggo leapt to his feet, causing the chair to topple over. “*Have you taken leave of your senses?*”

“You never told him?” Bryn asked, although he didn’t seem too surprised. “Why?”

I sighed. “Would you have the heart to mar his hero’s name?”

“No. I suppose not,” Bryn said after a moment’s consideration. “But surely he’d believe you after what you’ve been through together.”

I gave him a frustrated look. “Did you believe me when I told you?”

He chewed on the question long enough to give me an answer.

“What are you talking about?” Viggo asked, turning from one friend to the other. “What haven’t you told me?”

“General Halvar is not who he says he is,” I said, then proceeded to tell him how I really came to be on Holger.

Viggo sputtered incoherently once I’d finished. “Inconceivable.”

I had braced myself for his disbelief, but still a flare of hurt rushed through me. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“Not you,” Viggo snapped. “The general. The Quest for Resources is too important to risk. Why would he be so quick to make enemies among the mainland natives? Did he think our immigrants would survive on foreign soil by brute force? We need allies! We need diplomatic cooperation.”

A little laugh escaped me. “So you believe me?”

Viggo gave me a look as if I were an imbecile. “What reason have you given me *not* to trust you?”

In the past, I would have simmered in anger at receiving such a look but not today. Viggo believed me. I had another friend on my side. I drew strength and hope from that thought.

“You’ve changed your mind,” Bryn said, “haven’t you?”

I tore my gaze from Viggo’s face. “In a way. I struggle to believe that the general has so skillfully lied to his king but… there’s something about Torvald’s manner that doesn’t align with the image of a heartless barbarian. I’ll investigate and keep a close eye on him for now. I’ll have opportunities to kill him in the future should I find anything incriminating, but General Halvar must pay for his crimes, both past and present. I can’t let him continue to devastate the other nations. The diplomats the king sent are either dead or too afraid to defy the general. Someone has to take a stand.” I proceeded to tell them about my plans to influence the king to change his mind about the Quest for Resources and bring his men back home.

Viggo righted his chair and sat. “It won’t work. We need resources more desperately than you know and we have to be able to emigrate without fear of oppression or persecution.”

“So Holgarians must do the oppressing and persecuting first?” I asked. “There has to be another way.”

“Maybe there was but, after all the damage the general has done, do you think the other nations will ever willingly work with us?” Bryn asked.

“Whose side are you on?” I snapped.

Bryn raised his hands in surrender. “Neither and both. You have been wronged. You deserve justice, and so does every other citizen of the free world who has suffered a similar fate. But our country is in a desperate situation. Our numbers grow every year but our island isn’t getting any bigger. The general is wrong, but he’s getting good results. Read a newspaper; we’re recieving steady shipments of wool, lumber, and coal every six to eight months, not to mention fresh vegetables and iron ores. It might be harder than you realize to persuade the king and his counselors to consider a different option.”

I took a deep breath and tried to remember whom I was speaking to. “I don’t care how hard it will be. I have to try, Behnam.”

Upon hearing the name his mother had given him, Bryn sighed. “I fear the general is more devious than we imagine. Somehow, he’s managed to fool the king and the counselors into thinking their representatives are succeeding in their mission with very little bloodshed. He’s been doing this for many years. I think it’s safe to assume that he’ll come after you if he has to choose between

destroying Dotharr's Miracle and preserving his good name. But I can see that you have made up your mind, Asta, Isa, Lady Warrior of the Island. Come what may, I'll support and help you however I can."

I reached across the table to grip his hand. "Thank you."

He smiled and gave my hand a squeeze. We both turned expectantly to Viggo.

Our mutual friend rolled his eyes and waved a hand at us. "Yes, yes, you have my support as well. You're a pair of fools, but you are *my* fools and I can't let you attempt this impossible venture on your own."

Chapter Thirteen

"My first official task as King's Defender will be to appoint you as guard master," I said, shaking Viggo's hand. "We'll see each other again soon."

"You might want to read your official job description before you start dismissing and hiring staff members," Viggo said with a smirk.

I released his hand. "I'll put in a good word. You should've been chosen as well. I have to do something to get you working on the royal hill or I'll be plagued with guilt forever. What will you do until then?"

"Return home," he said. "But I won't be a burden to my family. I'll find some work in the city."

I embraced Bryn one last time. "Continue to excel in your schooling. I'll see you working on the royal hill too someday."

"And what an honor it will be to work with my friends." Bryn's smile was soft when we released each other. "Take care of yourself, Asta."

I bowed my head. "Until we meet again."

We took turns leaving the alley. Samir cast annoyed glances at the mystic store and the setting sun in turn. I scurried out while he was glaring at the sun and walked across the street as casually as possible.

"Where are your herbs?" he asked, leaping from the carriage.

"After I gathered what I needed, I realized I didn't have enough money. I'll come back another time when I've earned more."

Samir helped me up and hurried back to his seat. "What a waste! Now we must speed you to the royal hill and pray we arrive in time for dinner!"

My stomach gurgled. "Yes, dinner sounds wonderful."

The chauffeur spurred on the horses and they accelerated, throwing me back into my seat. "The king can't be kept waiting. It's the first thing I learned when I started this job."

I blinked. "I'm to dine with the king?"

He wrenched the reins to the side, causing the horses to turn a corner at a reckless speed. "Of course! As his Defender, you must go with him everywhere. An enemy could be lurking around any corner. One foreign attacker was found hiding in His Majesty's personal washroom."

Unease twisted my stomach. *What exactly is this job going to demand of me?*

Samir glanced at my face and groaned. "If you're going to be sick, lean out the side. This is an expensive carriage. Honestly, my lady,

weren't you told anything at the academy?"

I scowled at him. "I wasn't given the details of a Defender's assignment. I didn't even know I was a candidate until two months ago."

He yanked the reins back and shook a fist in the air when we were caught behind a slow carriage. He grumbled curses and threw an arm out to the side to indicate he wanted to pass the person in front of us. When he had the opportunity, he spurred the horses onward and we swung around the slow driver.

"As His Majesty's bodyguard, you work closely with the other Defenders and the guard master, who is in charge of us guards. We are at your disposal but the king's safety is mainly a Defender's priority. You memorize the designs of the hilltop and any other building the king is going to be in during the week. When the king is home, you search every nook and cranny periodically, read the guard patrol progress reports, investigate every guest who comes in or any member of staff who leaves, and stay at the king's elbow when it's your turn."

We raced through a bumpy section of the road. Samir's voice bounced along with us. "Before the king goes a-anywhere, you must scout the lo-ca-tion at least three days prior to his arrival and make note of a-any suspicious characters or act-ivi-ties. You communicate with the guard m-master concerning the position of the king's esc-corts, make escape plans for His Majesty, and discuss everyth-thing that could possibly go wrong. You should never b-be surprised. A good Defend-der is always prepared."

"And you know this because of your vast experience in the area?" I said.

My chauffeur shrugged as we progressed to smoother ground. "That's what all the other Defenders do."

"When do I sleep? When do I eat? When do I have a moment to myself?"

"When you're not on duty. The king has four other Defenders who trade shifts throughout the week. Their names are Hemming, Lennart, Finley, and Gabor. You have the authority to commandeer us guards while your fellow Defenders are off duty if you require assistance of any kind, but you must go through Master Philo first. He is the guard master on the hilltop."

We exited the city and approached a hill made of rock and grass. The royal grounds were encircled by a white stone wall. Another wall was built around the base of the hill with guard towers and a gatehouse. My escort fished a piece of string out of the front of his shirt, which had a thin silver plate with golden lettering hanging off the end. He showed the plate to the man at the gate when we were close enough. The guard pulled on the lever to allow us passage, and

the portcullis slowly slid upward.

"In time, you will be given your own," Samir said, tucking the plaque away. "The documentation plaque has an oily outer layer that glimmers in the light. Those without one will not be granted access. There are no exceptions."

I watched the guards patrolling the wall while we waited. They all had rust-colored eyes. They were heavily armed and dressed in the same armor as Samir. A moat had been dug around this wall, but instead of being inhabited by formidable sea creatures like the moats in all the fairytales I'd read, it was filled with tar and oil.

So that it can be lit with fire in the event of an attack, I realized.

At last, the portcullis had risen high enough for us to pass. We galloped up the winding dirt road to the royal grounds. There was a guard tower on the corner of every other turn. I stopped counting after a time. I couldn't decide whether to be exasperated or impressed by the security. This hill was the greenest thing I'd seen since arriving on Holger. The grasses were tall on either side of the road. It smelled so fresh. I took deep, greedy breaths and savored the drop in temperature. When I poked my head out of the carriage, I could see over the city and to the end of the island. The enormous fishing vessels looked like toys from this distance. The sea swayed ever so gently across the horizon, reflecting the dying rays of the sun.

Once we arrived at the second stone wall, the gates were opened for us. Each gate was as wide as five men and as tall as eight. I stared, open mouthed, as we passed through. Despite this being the crest of the hill, it wasn't entirely flat. Grand steps led to the upper ward where the finest and largest buildings stood.

Samir hastily parked the carriage beside a handful of identical ones and the monster of a vehicle General Halvar and I had taken to the Dotharr's Academy when I first arrived on the island. On the other side of the last stagecoach were two stables, and beside that a barn. I could hear the clucking of chickens, the grunting of cows, the snorting of pigs, the squawking of geese, and the gentle whinnying of horses.

Across the ward, servants bustled in and out of a three-story building. From the limited views through the open windows, I gathered it was their sleeping quarters. I assumed the identical building next to it was where the off-duty guards slept. As I climbed down from the carriage, the gates were opened once again and two more carriages flew in.

I caught Samir's eye as he unloaded my purchases from the back of our carriage. "My escorts, I presume?"

His arms were heavily laden with parcels of shoes and bags of men's clothing, but he reached for the final shopping bag in the storage compartment. "Yes, and not a minute too soon. All these

carriages have to be checked in before nightfall."

I plucked the final bag before he could and closed the lid of the compartment. "Can I have a tour of this place or do we have to rush straight to dinner?"

"We have to get you to your chambers before we can even think about dinner. Did you expect to appear before the king dressed like that?"

I groaned. "What is wrong with what I'm wearing now?"

"Dagmar has her work cut out for her," he murmured, bustling away while balancing his pile of parcels. "Follow me."

I hurried to keep up. "Who's Dagmar?"

"Your handmaiden."

"I don't need a handmaiden," I said with a shake of my head.

"Nevertheless, you have one, and you will treat her with respect," Samir said over his shoulder. "Dagmar will not be shunned by anyone. The sooner you accept her guidance, the better off you'll be."

I blew the hair out of my face and frowned, but said nothing.

The guard also acting as my chauffeur nodded to the pair of buildings across from us. "Those are the servants' and guards' quarters, the laundry house, the smithy and the training grounds, and Thistle Pub. The king allows his off-duty staff to enjoy a meal cooked by someone else and a stiff drink, although, there is a limit to everyone's alcohol consumption."

I hadn't noticed the latter three buildings but I could see them now that he pointed them out to me. The laundry house was a smaller, dome-roofed building tucked away behind the living quarters while the training ground was a roped-off rectangle of earth with the smithy's building stretched out along the side. The pub appeared to be the same size as the guards' quarters but only one story tall.

"As you can see, the stable and the barns are over there. The white marble building by the steps is the chapel, and the brick building next to it is the school."

"The king allows his staff's children to live here as well?" I asked.

Samir smiled, puffing out his chest. "Our rewards for life-long servitude are comfortable homes, the best education for our children, the honor of worshiping our Heavenly Masters in the king's chapel, and two to three days leave a year."

"The king's family lives here as well," I assumed.

He nodded. "As you probably know, King Torvald's mother died while giving birth to him and his father was executed. He has several half siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins, a maternal grandfather, and a paternal grandmother. All of whom live in the upper ward along with the king and his counselors. You will be required to learn their names and memorize their faces in the future."

“If he has half siblings, does that mean he has a stepmother?” I dared ask.

“King Tatsuo took many servant girls to his bed in the years after his wife passed away,” Samir said. “He forced them to take herbs that would prevent them from becoming pregnant, but only after he fathered two sons and a daughter. We don’t acknowledge the mistresses as royalty, but King Torvald has allowed them to stay here. Those two women, Ladies Bodil and Helka, along with their children, Prince Raoul, Prince Haskell, and Princess Evie, are the only members of the king’s family with permission to enter his personal home. Remember that.”

I frowned. *So far everything being said collaborates with Viggo’s descriptions of our sovereign…*

My escort nodded to the buildings in the upper ward as we ascended. “The golden building is the king’s home. That glass building is where the counselors meet weekly with the king and with any other Holgarians who have an appointment. That marble building is the keep. It also holds the throne room, the kitchens, and the Great Hall of History. Our country’s most prized and historical possessions are there, and heavily guarded.

“That gray stone building is the garrison. That two-story brick building is the hospital. Next to it are the craftsmen workspaces, where the royal seamstresses, chandlers, cobblers, woodworkers, and the like create. That jade building is the home of the royal family and the counselors. The designs of all these buildings are kept by Master Philo. I’m sure he will loan them to you upon your request.”

In the midst of the buildings in the upper ward was a magnificent spring. It was large enough to hold a school of fish and a family of ducks. Lily pads and flowers dotted the clear water’s surface. I ran over to the edge to watch the fish swim. It smelled and looked so natural, but clean also.

“Is this manmade? It’s beautiful.”

Samir sighed, apparently irritated by my curiosity. “No, that was here when the first royal family built this place and is only touched by man when it needs to be purified of animal feces.” He jerked his head toward the king’s golden home. “Come now. Dagmar is expecting us.”

The structure wasn’t entirely made of gold. The walls were constructed of bath stone and it had an ordinary tiled roof. The high, round archways were lined with gold, along with the windowpanes, the stone porch railing, and the decorative columns. Above the porch was an exquisite balcony where small tables and lounging chairs were arranged by an open hearth. A smaller, more private balcony was constructed on the side of the mansion, overlooking the wall and the sea beyond. Connected to the house and off to the side of the stone

porch was a short, rounded tower. On the other side of the porch I could see a nook, with white curtains.

All around the house were bushels of roses and little white flowers, perfectly pruned and taken care of. I didn't have much time to admire them, unfortunately, because my escort snapped at me over his shoulder when he realized I was lingering by the porch.

The oak front door had been opened by a tall, wiry woman with curly white hair pulled back by a leather cord. She wore a plain brown dress with a white apron, like all the other servants I'd seen, along with working boots. Her brown eyes were narrowed as they examined me, her lips pressed firmly together.

I tried to smile. "Dagmar, I presume."

"So this is the great Lady Isa the master has spoken so much about," she grunted, unimpressed.

I blinked. *The master? Does she mean the king? What could he possibly have to say about me? We've hardly spoken!*

Samir dropped my parcels and bags inside and came back out. "Good luck." He paused briefly to bow in my direction. "And good luck to you also, Lady Warrior. This is going to be an adjustment for us all." Then he hurried back to the lower ward and was swallowed up by the night.

Chapter Fourteen

Dagmar shut the door behind me, took my arm, and dragged me to the staircase. I caught a glimpse of a long hall with moss-green walls, and several landscape paintings and portraits of people I didn't recognize. The floor was made of dark wood but a rug stretched down the length of the hallway. As Dagmar towed me up the stairs, I noticed three alcoves in the wall that held labeled busts. One was of Torvald's great-grandfather, the other his grandfather, and the third was of King Tatsuo.

Dagmar led me past the head of the stairs and to the right. The hall stretched far in both directions. A wooden table and mirror with small portraits along the table's surface sat before me, separating eight doors on either side. Dagmar kept me from seeing the faces in these portraits with a yank.

"You will have time to explore your new home later," she said before I could protest. "The master has his dinner at seven sharp, and we will not keep him waiting."

"Why do you call him 'the master' instead of king?" I asked.

"Because he was my master before he became king." Dagmar opened the fourth door on the left and pushed me into the room. "Undress, bathe, and meet me in the next room on the right in ten minutes." Then she slammed the door in my face.

I was in a washroom constructed entirely of tile. There was no curtain dividing the room or cubicle to keep the water from running all over the floor. The second half of the room was lower than the first; two steps lower, in fact. By the door, there was a full-length mirror, a counter and sink, and five hooks along the wall with different colored towels. I undressed and walked across the room. Three spouts and knobs pointed at me from three different directions. I turned them all on and stepped into the water. It was as if I were standing in a torrent of rain.

Looking down, I watched the water gather around the drain at my feet like a miniature whirlpool. The wall was lined with bottles of soaps, oils, and perfumes. I couldn't enjoy any of this, however. I had to hurry or I was sure Dagmar would bite my head off.

Once I was finished washing, I wrapped my hair and body in towels, and stepped into the bath slippers under the sink. I checked the hallway to make sure it was clear before sneaking into the room next door on the right. A lively fire crackled in the hearth. The wooden four-poster bed was high enough to need a stepping stool and was adorned with a dozen pillows. The chest at the foot of the bed had a vase of roses on the lid's flat surface. A dressing table and stool

sat in one corner, a tea table with two plush chairs sat in another, and a closet door was in the third. The peach walls gave the room a warm and comfortable glow. The floors were wooden in here also but two rectangular rugs lounged on opposite sides of the room.

Dagmar stood by my dressing table with a comb in one hand and an eye on the clock, which sat on the mantelpiece. “You’re late.” I opened my mouth to object but she waved a hand at the stool before her. “Never mind. Sit.”

I obeyed. She combed my auburn hair without mercy. I winced and complained whenever she yanked at a knot, but that didn’t slow her down. Once she’d finished combing it, she sectioned off certain parts of my hair and began to braid it. I don’t know how long I sat there and watched her work through the mirror, but my bottom was sore by the time she was finally done. She’d given me an amazing side bun, with the shorter hairs pinned neatly.

“Now, into the dress,” she said.

I looked over my shoulder to see a satin blue dress with silver trimmings and a plunging neckline. A pair of silver elbow-length gloves sat beside it along with a corset and a hoop skirt.

I leapt up. “I can’t wear that!”

Dagmar’s eyes narrowed. “And why not?”

“It’s much too revealing. Have you no modesty?”

My handmaiden folded her arms across her chest and stood at her full height. “You listen here, Lady Isa. If we are ever going to get along, you must learn that my judgment is best. And you won’t learn that unless you trust me. Until your dresses are delivered, we are going to have to borrow a few from the royal family’s storage. This is the only one I could find in your size that was fine enough for this occasion.” She lifted the corset. “Shall we begin?”

I could hardly breathe, and the shoes pinched my toes. But I looked beautiful. I stared at my reflection in quiet wonder while Dagmar adorned my ears and neck with jewels. My face felt heavy with makeup for the first time in a very long time. It was going to take some getting used to. I was showing more cleavage than I was comfortable with, but the jewels drew the eye to my throat. Now I understood why my previous dress had been inadequate.

Dagmar’s eyes softened when she stepped back to admire her work. “You are indeed a sight to behold, my lady.”

“Thank you,” I whispered. “You were right.”

Dagmar nodded. “Of course I was. Now hurry. Down the stairs, past the drawing room on the left, to the dining room. You must arrive before the master. Sit wherever you like. I believe the young princes and princess are already seated.”

“You’re not coming with me?”

“No, my lady. I eat with the other servants. You go on ahead and enjoy your evening.” She caught my elbow before I could leave. “But remember your manners, don’t speak unless spoken to, and don’t you dare ruin that dress.”

* * *

I gripped the railing with one hand and lifted my skirt with the other. Slowly but surely, I made my way down the stairs. Fortunately, I would be sitting for most of the evening and wouldn’t need to grow accustomed to walking in these shoes. But I did need to get to the dining table without falling or tearing my dress. I inched along the hallway and past the drawing room, hearing the voices of children.

“I hope we have potatoes tonight,” one squeaked. “I will devour them like a sea monster!” The proclamation was followed by a series of guttural snarls and growls.

“Haskell,” a maternal voice softly chided. “Stop that, my son. It’s not gentlemanly.”

The giggles of a little girl made my mouth curl upward. “Haskell, you have spit on your chin.”

A slightly older male voice grumbled, “Wipe your face. You act like such a fool.”

“Raoul,” his mother chastised. In an embarrassed whisper she added, “I’m so sorry, Helka. He has no manners.”

“It’s quite all right, Bodil. I don’t believe Haskell took offense.”

“That’s Prince Fool to you, Raoul!” Haskell said with a laugh.

The sensation of someone’s eyes on the back of my head made my neck prickle uncomfortably. Movement disturbed the air and I turned to grip the hand that stretched toward me. I came face to face with a barrel chest covered by a silk shirt and a waistcoat. I looked up. A man with flaming orange curls and a matching goatee leered down at me. “Well, she’s quick at least.”

“We’re all quick, Gabor,” said a man at the foot of the stairs. “It means very little.”

I released the meaty hand of this Gabor, recognizing his name as one of the Defenders’. I couldn’t fathom how I hadn’t heard his approach. He was a bear of a man, even burlier and taller than Viggo. His counterpart, whom I assumed was another Defender, was his opposite in every way. He was lean and about my height, with an angular face and copper eyes that danced with laughter as if he had recently made a joke at my expense. His straight blond hair was long and pulled back with a cord. He dressed just as finely as Gabor, with

his silk shirt, waistcoat and trousers, only he also wore a tailcoat.

He pushed off the wooden railing and sauntered toward me. “I suppose we should say welcome. It’s not every day Dotharr sends a miracle to the royal hilltop.”

“Thank you,” I said slowly, waiting for the insult.

He extended his hand when he was near enough. “Lennart, at your service.”

I shook his hand before he could kiss the top of mine. “Pleased to make your acquaintance. I understand I’m to work with two others?”

Lennart smiled, like a hunter amused by the struggles of his prey. “Hemming is delivering the king to the hill as we speak. They should be here any moment. Gabor and I will take over guard duty then. Finley is dining with his family but will relieve us at midnight.”

I released his hand. “Very well. What am I to do?”

“You are to dine with the king,” Gabor said with a sneer. “Become acquainted with his family, his home, his movements. Did you learn nothing at the academy?”

“I learned not to expect any special treatment simply because I’m a woman,” I said. “I learned how to use my opponent’s strength against them because, let’s face it, every enemy I encounter is going to be bigger and stronger than I am. I learned not to trust anyone who seemed to dislike me, even remotely. And, most importantly, I learned to rely on no one but myself.”

Gabor blinked.

Lennart chuckled. “Didn’t learn much, did you?”

I smiled sweetly at the beast of a man still looming before me. “I learned enough. Now, if we’re finished belittling Dotharr’s freak, would you mind giving me an overview of what I’m to expect while working here?”

“Perhaps after dinner,” Lennart said before Gabor could reply. “The king is not to be kept waiting. Do try to enjoy your evening, Lady Isa.”

I spun on my heel and stepped through the doorway. The rectangular dining table was smaller than I thought it would be. It only seated eight. A centerpiece of flowers and candles was arranged over a cloth runner that extended down the middle of the table. Glass goblets, fine china, and silverware had already been set. A window stretched across one wall; an enormous fireplace and mirror dominated the other. Above the table hung a golden chandelier with countless candles lit. The room smelled of cinnamon and pine, and made me relax despite my recent encounter. I had hoped to be free of the pride of men once I’d arrived here, but it seemed I was wrong.

A scrawny boy sat between a little girl and a slender woman with curly red hair. I knew she was their mother because they too had red

curls. The boy had her same brown eyes, but the little girl had dark blue eyes like Torvald. Across from them sat a boy entering manhood with Torvald's same black hair, but brown eyes. The woman sitting next to him shared his eyes and full lips. They were dressed as finely as I was. They all watched me with the same bewildered expression.

I dipped into a curtsey. "My apologies. I was told I would be welcome to dine with the king."

The legs of two chairs scraped against the wooden floor. I straightened up to see both women standing and smiling.

"You must be Lady Isa," said the slender woman with curly hair. "You are most welcome here. My name is Helka, and these are my children, Haskell and Evie." She held a hand out to the little boy and girl, who bowed their heads in respect.

"I am Bodil," the woman with dark hair said. "And this is my son, Raoul."

Raoul stood quickly and fell into a bow. "I am most honored to make your acquaintance, Lady Isa."

His mother joined the others in giving him strange looks. Then Bodil smiled at me again. "Please, be seated wherever you like. His Majesty should be here shortly."

"Thank you." I approached the seat closest to me at the end of the table.

Prince Raoul hurried to pull the chair out for me, flashing a smile. I nodded graciously and sat as the chair was pushed in. Then I folded my hands in my lap and waited. Raoul sat beside his mother and continued beaming at me. Prince Haskell made kissing faces at his half brother until his mother threw him a stern look. Princess Evie squirmed in her seat and tugged on her mother's sleeve.

"Yes, darling?" Lady Helka said, leaning over slightly.

"Why do her eyes glow, Momma?"

"She was chosen by Dotharr to be a warrior, like the other guards who keep us safe."

"But she's a girl," the princess said in what she probably thought was a whisper.

Both Bodil and Helka winced, and shot me apologetic glances.

I smiled. "It's all right. I'm a rarity among my kind, Princess Evie. That's why I was chosen for this special task."

"You're going to protect Torvald, aren't you?" Haskell said. "You're going to follow him wherever he goes and make sure no one harms him, like Arvid and Elof and Gunnar and all the other Defenders that came before you."

"Haskell," Helka hissed.

The boy continued as if his mother hadn't spoken. "But you aren't going to die like they did, right? You're going to outlive them all so

that Raoul can marry you when he's old enough."

Raoul's face turned bright red. "Shut your mouth!"

"Mind your manners," his mother said, elbowing him in the side.

Evie clapped her hands and smiled. "That would be wonderful! You would make beautiful babies."

"Evie," Helka groaned. "That is not suitable table conversation."

I laughed. "I do hope I outlive the other Defenders, Prince Haskell, but if I had to marry anyone, it would be—"

My words died in my throat as King Torvald appeared in the doorway. He was taller than I remembered. The glass circlet crown was still in place. I hadn't noticed before but there were small golden gems embedded in the glass. He had changed out of the stiff white uniform and gloves, and now wore a white shirt under a gold and white embroidered waistcoat, black breeches, and those same sleek, black boots. If he wasn't a violent warlord, I might've thought him handsome. My body grew tense with unease.

He smiled at us, those impossibly dark blue eyes shining. He tugged at his cravat. "Sorry I'm late."

"Torvy!" Evie would've leapt from her chair and most likely tackled him with a hug had her mother not put a hand out to restrain her.

The king laughed as he approached the table. "Hugs after dinner, Evie. I'm famished!"

As if on cue, the dining room was flooded with servants. The six of us made to rise but the king waved a hand to stop us.

He bowed to Helka and Bodil. "Good evening to you." He peeked up to meet my surprised gaze. "And to you as well, Lady Isa."

"Good evening, Your Majesty," the women chorused.

"Yes, good evening to you," I murmured down at my plate.

The king grinned before seating himself and putting a napkin in his lap. The servants brought the first course and filled our goblets with wine, although I imagine Haskell and Evie were given juice.

Torvald spooned clam chowder into his mouth as Evie chattered about her day. Lady Helka shook her head and sent sympathetic smiles King Torvald's way, but he didn't seem to mind.

"After I survived my studies, I asked the servants for some chocolate pudding. But they wouldn't give me any because they said it would spoil my dinner," Evie said with a temporary frown. "But then I remembered I had a play date with cousin Indria and I felt better. She's loads of fun."

"For a nine year old," Haskell scoffed.

Evie stuck her tongue out at her brother, earning a scowl from her mother. Then she continued with her narrative. "We braided each other's hair and played with our dolls and then swam in the spring."

Torvald gasped. “They let you swim in the spring? *I’m* not even allowed to do that!”

“No one is allowed to swim in the spring,” Helka said. “My daughter and her cousin were dragged out of the water by the guards and escorted to my rooms.”

Evie pouted. “I was forced to bathe in the middle of the day and sit in my room all alone until evening. It was not pleasant.”

“Perhaps you’ll remember that before agreeing to Indria’s next scheme,” Helka sniffed. “It isn’t proper for young ladies to swim in public springs.”

“But it’s perfectly acceptable to swim in *private* springs,” Haskell said matter of factly.

Helka shot him a poisonous look, but the comment made Torvald laugh so she let it slide.

The king finished his salad before addressing Raoul. “And how was your day, brother?”

Raoul shrugged and stirred his soup. “Fine, I suppose.”

“Raoul was rejected by a girl today,” Haskell announced.

If Raoul could reach, he probably would’ve kicked his half brother under the table.

Bodil dropped her spoon into her bowl with a clatter. “Not possible! Who would reject a Prince of Holger?”

“Raziya would,” Haskell said with a smirk.

“You’ll stop talking this instant if you know what’s good for you!” Raoul practically spat.

“Haskell,” his mother said, “that’s quite enough.”

The boy put a finger to his chin and thoughtfully gazed up at the ceiling. “What reason did she give again? Ahh, yes. Not enough fencing experience. She only dates men of valor.”

Prince Raoul rose, dark eyes screaming murder. “You little weasel! How do you know this? Have you been following me?”

“Raoul,” Torvald murmured, drawing all eyes to himself. “Please, sit down.”

The prince fell into his seat and spooned soup into his mouth without meeting anyone’s eyes. The king frowned at Haskell until the boy’s smile faded and he sunk low in his seat.

“If you’re determined to be a pest, you’ll no longer be welcome at my table,” Torvald said. “That information wasn’t yours to share. Apologize to your brother.”

“I’m sorry,” Prince Haskell murmured, eyes downcast.

“I suppose I don’t need to ask how you spent your day,” the king said with a disappointed sigh. “Spying on others from that perch of yours isn’t a productive way to—”

“What else would you have him do?” Raoul said. “He doesn’t

have any friends."

"I do so!" Haskell shouted.

Torvald took his crown off and placed it on the table. It might as well been made out of gold by the way everyone stared at it. He looked from one boy to the next until he had their attention again.

"I speak now not as your king but as your older brother," he said. "When your need is most dire, many, many years from now, who can you call on if not each other? Find some way to get along before you push each other away forever. Respect your mothers. Respect each other. And stop this bickering in front of Lady Isa. You're not making a good first impression."

Suddenly, everyone was aware of me again. I looked down at my salad and pretended to be engrossed by the tomatoes. I didn't know how to feel, how to process everything I was learning about this man. But it was obvious that dinner was a family affair. I should've dined elsewhere. When I mustered the courage to look up and speak my mind, Torvald was wearing his crown again and asking the servants to bring the main course.

Chapter Fifteen

Ladies Bodil and Helka took turns talking during the main course of pork chops, steamed vegetables, and potatoes. Haskell refrained from devouring them like a sea monster, but he did seem very happy to be eating them. The king inquired about the comfort of their rooms, whether the servants were stocking the fireplaces with enough wood, whether they needed any extra spending money—not only for themselves but for the children. The women stated their needs, few though they were, and the king promised to see to them.

We were served chocolate pudding for dessert, much to Evie's delight, and strawberries with crème.

Before I could enjoy them, however, Torvald smiled at me and said, "Now it's your turn, Lady Isa."

I froze, my fork stopping just before it could reach my mouth. I tore my gaze from the strawberries to see I had everyone's attention. "You know how my day went, my lord. You were there."

"But the children weren't. I'm sure they would love to hear about your graduation ceremony and shopping spree."

"Oooh, did Torvy give you money to buy things?" Evie asked, her mouth smeared with chocolate.

"Yes, your brother was kind enough to supply me with a wardrobe," I said, smiling. "When I arrived at Dotharr's Academy, I was provided with some training and lounging clothes, but I had nothing to call my own."

"How awful!" the princess cried. "Everyone should have their own clothes. I'm glad Torvy rescued you."

I looked down at my plate again and picked at my strawberries.

"Your parents must be very proud to know you have found a job so soon after graduating from the academy," Lady Bodil said. "Will they visit often?"

I gripped the napkin in my lap until I could feel my nails through the material. "I wish it were so, my lady, but they have both passed away."

Her face drained of color and she immediately began stammering apologies.

"It's all right," I said, summoning another smile. "I know you meant no offense."

"I'm very sorry for your loss," Torvald said, and the others agreed.

I took a bite of strawberries, frustrated. Was he toying with me? Did he truly not know? How could he appear so genuine? My head was starting to ache.

“I hear you have to fight to prove your worth at the warrior academy’s graduation ceremony,” Haskell said after a moment of silence. “Who was your opponent? Was it a hard fight? Did you win?”

“It’s customary to take a breath between sentences,” Raoul murmured.

Haskell shot him a glare before turning his attention back to me.

It was a struggle to sound nonchalant. “I fought my good friend, Viggo. He’s the most talented fighter I know. It was a hard battle, especially in the rain. But yes, I eventually emerged victorious.”

Haskell’s face lit up with a grin. “You’re tougher than tough, aren’t you?”

I found myself smiling at his enthusiasm. “I suppose I am.”

“There is nothing to suppose,” Lady Helka said. “You survived a year in a men’s academy. That’s proof enough for me that there is no one alive who could match your strength.”

I bowed my head to hide my red cheeks. “Thank you, my lady. That’s kind of you to say.”

“I hope you don’t mind my saying so, Lady Isa, but I wonder at Dotharr’s decision to gift you with warrior talents,” she went on. “This life of working in the shadows, sneaking and killing, isn’t a life meant for a lady.”

The king frowned. “Helka, it isn’t your place to question a Heavenly Master.”

“I personally don’t believe in the Heavenly Masters,” I said, “but I have come to realize that we’re all placed in certain situations for a reason. I’m happy to discover my reason for being here while working in the shadows for our king.”

The statement was met with stunned silence. Viggo would call me a blasphemer, but these people were too afraid to contradict a trained killer. I sipped my wine and enjoyed the rest of my dessert in silence.

After the plates had been cleared, we ventured into the drawing room. Lady Helka took up the harp and Princess Evie climbed up onto the piano bench. They played softly and eloquently in the corner while the others lounged on couches too beautiful to be sat upon. Raoul pulled open a drawer in the table, took out a deck of playing cards, and began to shuffle them.

“I’ll be victorious this time!” Haskell announced.

Raoul scoffed. “We’ll see about that. Torvald, do you want to play?”

“Of course,” the king said. “But only if Bodil plays as well. It wouldn’t be as much fun without her.”

Bodil laughed and blushed as if embarrassed but pleased by his words.

I stood off to the side, unsure of my place.

My feelings must have been evident on my face because Bodil smiled at me. “Do sit with us, Lady Isa. If you’re unfamiliar with the game, you can learn by watching us play the first few rounds.”

My eyes were drawn to the window and the darkness beyond. “Thank you, my lady, but I must remain vigilant.” I passed Evie and her mother, and stationed myself by the window.

I watched the servants light the lanterns to illuminate the path for other servants and the patrolling guards. It seemed like a completely different world here on the royal hill, a quarantined little utopia. I had to wonder if the people within the walls were aware of the Quest for Resources or the other nations. Even the servants seemed bent on only one mission: to make the people here as comfortable as possible.

I watched everyone who passed, attentive and determined to memorize their faces at first. But the more time I spent standing there, the more I found my eyes wandering to the king’s reflection. I still hadn’t made up my mind about him. Even as he played, he was gracious and patient with his half brothers. He consulted with Lady Bodil behind his cards and laughed with her at Haskell’s outrage. He seemed so… comfortable.

“Aha!” Haskell cried. “How do you feel about that, Raoul?” He threw down some cards on the table.

“I think I’ll survive,” came the bored reply.

I noticed a servant heavily laden with scrolls lingering by the doorway so I left my spot to greet him.

“Lady Isa?” he said.

“Yes?”

He smiled. “Master Philo asked me to deliver these to you. They are the designs of every building on the grounds. I can put them in your room if you’d like.”

“That would be best.” I lowered my voice to ask, “Who is Master Philo?”

The servant replied, also quietly, “He is our guard master, my lady.”

I nodded, remembering. “Ah, yes. Thank you.”

The servant bowed and left. He was replaced by another servant, who came into the drawing room to ask if we wanted anything to drink. Naturally, he inclined his ear to the king first. Something small but sharp hit the window, shattering it. Then the servant fell back, a small dart embedded in his neck. Helka and Bodil let out high-pitched screams and reached for the nearest child. The king hit the ground; a dart embedded itself into the back of his plush chair. I caught the one that was meant for me between my fingers just before it could strike me in the face. I tossed it aside, lunged forward, and drew the drapes

shut.

"Everyone stay down!" I commanded as I sprinted into the hall, almost twisting my ankle because of my accursed shoes. I tore them off, then ran to the front door and threw it open. I met Gabor and Lennart in the yard. "Where have you been?" I panted, more upset with the restraining corset than with them.

"We've been doing our job," Gabor sneered. "What are *you* doing out here?"

"It doesn't matter," Lennart snapped. "Where did those shots come from?"

"The jade building would have the best vantage point of the window," I said, pointing. By the light of the full moon, I could see a shadow running along the roof.

Lennart grabbed a nearby guard by the arm and pointed at the gate in the distance. "Sound the alarm! Don't let anyone leave! The king has been assaulted!"

The guard pulled a horn from his belt and blew hard enough to make my ears ring. Then he sprinted off toward the main gate to carry out his orders. I hiked up the skirts of my dress and ran past the spring.

"What do you think you're doing?" I heard Gabor holler somewhere behind me. "Get back inside!"

I relieved a passing guard of his dagger and sprinted around the jade building, keeping the enemy assailant in sight. He was fast, but not faster than me. I came to the backside of the building just as he leapt off the roof. I took a moment to aim before throwing the dagger. It flew end over end and intercepted the falling man before he could reach the stone wall surrounding the grounds. He let out a shout, dropped out of the sky, and fell to the earth in a heap. Nearby servants and guards rushed to the writhing body in curiosity.

"Everyone out of the way!" I shouted and, surprisingly, they obeyed. I knelt before the man, chest heaving in the damned corset, and turned him over. Dark hair heavy with sweat and grime. Rust-colored eyes wide in shock. Blood dribbling down his chin. With a jolt, I realized I'd seen this man before.

"Gosta," one of the soldiers murmured, "look at her eyes."

"You can still have her, Gosta," another jeered. "The general need not know."

I drew back in surprise and disgust, for it was the very same man who had taken me to the general that night my world had been torn apart. I turned to my audience, trembling in my too-tight dress. "Someone call a doctor!" My voice cracked. I swore, yanked the

dagger out of his side, and pressed my hands against Gosta's wound. Pounding footsteps and disciplined breathing announced the arrival of my fellow Defenders.

"What have you done?" Lennart demanded. "Who is he?"

Gabor bent down to retrieve something from the ground. "Look here. What do you suppose this is?"

"It's a blowgun," Lennart said slowly. "Strange."

"He…" Gosta coughed up more blood. "He said…"

"Who?" I asked, leaning forward. "Who made you do this?"

He focused on something behind and above me. I looked over my shoulder to see a man standing in a balcony on the fourth story of the jade building. He leaned casually against the railing, looking down at the scene below. He smirked when he saw me watching and sauntered back into his room. I turned back to Gosta to tell him I had to leave but the doctor would be here soon. He gripped my hand before I could speak, fear and desperation twisting his glistening face. His body convulsed twice more and then he was still.

I threw the door open and marched into the room, gripping my dagger with bloody fingers. Ten guards raised their crossbows, eyes uncertain and hands unsteady. General Halvar leaned back in a plush chair, sipping hot tea.

"If you think you're safe from me, you're gravely mistaken," I seethed.

"Not yet," the general said.

"What?"

General Halvar placed the tea cup back on its saucer on the table before him as hurried footsteps came down the hall. "I'm not safe from you yet."

I spun around to see another ten men blocking the doorway. The general was smiling when I faced him again.

"One of these days, you won't be so guarded," I said, raising the bloody dagger. "And that'll be the day this dagger will pierce your black, empty heart!"

"You aren't still upset about what happened in Kenshore, are you?" the general asked with a chuckle. "So much time has passed since then."

I took a step forward, causing all twenty men to tense. "You sent Gosta to assassinate the king."

The general rolled his eyes. "The king was never in real danger. Gosta's aim is worse than—"

"You meant to test me! I refused to kill for you in the sand pit, so you sent one of your seamen to play cat and mouse." I was aware of my shrill voice but I could do nothing to contain it. *I just killed a man.*

I just killed a man! My stomach roiled in confusion and anger, and it was an effort to remain upright. I swallowed hard to keep the bile down.

The general reached for one of the cake platters on the table. "He's dead then?"

"Look at me," I said with a wave at my bloodstained dress. "Do you think he survived?"

The general raised his bushy eyebrow. The burned side of his forehead simply rose a little. "Why are you upset? Did you forget that it was Gosta who wanted to bed you?"

If the guards around us were confused by our conversation, they didn't show it. They simply held their weapons at the ready and stared at me, determined to protect their precious general.

"He was selfish and disgusting, but he didn't commit the crime he was killed for," I said.

The general went back to the difficult decision of which pound cake to eat first. "He was stupid enough to get on my nerves. Thank you ever so much for disposing of him for me. That is a lovely dress, by the way."

I shuddered at the compliment and glared at him. "I'm not your pawn. I will *never* kill for you."

Those odd, unnerving eyes bored into mine. "You should watch your tone, Lady Isa."

"I'm not afraid of you," I said, meeting his gaze despite the memories of blood and pain.

A smile stretched across his face. He finally chose a pound cake and took a bite. He chewed for a few heartbeats before swallowing. "It appears you and I are going to have to share the hill occasionally, Lady Isa. I suggest you learn how to better control your emotions. Your tantrums are starting to annoy me and you know how efficiently I can take care of bothersome people." He returned the pound cake to its platter and dusted the sugar from his hands. "Just look at what happened to Gosta."

I gripped the dagger until my knuckles hurt but my heart seized up in my chest.

The general gave me a sly look as he leaned back into his seat. "That will be all, Asta."

Those words… I knew them. I swore I'd heard them in a dream once, a hazy nightmare where I'd been robbed of the power to govern my own body. Goosebumps rushed over my skin. Why had he said those words exactly? It was as if he had the ability to look into my mind and see the things that I feared the most.

I shuddered and retreated.

Chapter Sixteen

Helka, Bodil and the children had gone when I trudged into the drawing room. King Torvald spoke to a stocky gentleman with a handlebar mustache and graying hair. He wore a black and purple uniform with medals. Gabor and Lennart stood by the empty window frame, muttering amongst themselves. The servant who had been struck was alive but unconscious, snoring on the couch while being examined by a doctor.

"Lady Isa!" the king said when he noticed me. "Are you hurt?"

I found his concern irritating, not only because of the possibility that it could be an act but also because it might be real. I fought the urge to growl at him. "I'm fine. The blood you see isn't my own. How are the children and their mothers?"

The king came close as if to gauge for himself whether I was truly all right or not. He frowned. "This isn't right. You shouldn't have to…" He looked away, suddenly embarrassed. "Forgive me. My siblings and their mothers are alarmed but unhurt."

The man with the mustache joined us by the doorway. "Lady Isa, I am Philo, guard master here on the royal grounds. The king has told me what happened, but can you walk me through the events of the evening for my records?"

Gabor and Lennart abandoned the window to hear my account. I told Philo everything, including the death of Gosta and my confrontation with the general. I didn't tell him or the king about the details of our conversation, only that General Halvar had confirmed his involvement in the scheme and I had expressed my distaste.

Philo shook his head and *tssked*. "This explains why your servant is merely asleep and not dead, Your Majesty. But what kind of man would sacrifice one of his own crewmen for a test?"

I looked into the king's eyes when I said, "Not the kind of man I would want representing Holger overseas."

Torvald frowned. "I'll speak to the general myself and see that he understands the severity of his actions tonight." He turned to his guard master. "Philo, would you mind stationing more guards around my home so that Lady Isa can rest tonight? She's had a taxing first day out of the academy."

"That won't be necessary, my lord," Lennart said without missing a beat. "Gabor and I will be patrolling the grounds tonight. Everyone under your roof can rest easy."

"If you would give me a moment to freshen up," I told Master Philo, "I would like to join you in a patrol and become more acquainted with your men. I obviously have much to learn." I bowed

to the king. “Good night, Your Majesty. Rest well.” Then I spun on my heel and walked away before anyone could object.

Tears overwhelmed me the moment the washroom door was shut. I peeled off the ruined gloves and dress. I cut the laces of the corset with the stolen dagger. I sobbed, and was about to put my face in my hands when I saw the blood. It was under my nails, in the lines of my palms, splashed across the creases at my wrists. After turning on the faucet, I grabbed the bar of soap, and began to scrub. The water ran red, then pink. Even after it began to run clear, I kept scrubbing.

I could still see the fear in Gosta’s eyes. I could still see the blood on his chin, his gushing wound. Perhaps he *had* deserved to die. I had wanted to kill him the night my town had been overrun. But he had still been a person. What authority did I have to take a human life? A graduation plaque from a warrior’s academy? The king’s ring? Suddenly, they meant nothing to me. I felt wrong, changed, violated somehow.

I looked in the mirror, into the eyes of a killer. I hated General Halvar with a passion that consumed me, but I hated those eyes all the more. I used a little bit of soap and a towel to wash away the makeup, although my tears had done most of the work for me. Then I tore out of the wooden hoop skirt and my undergarments to bathe.

It’s over, I thought grimly. *I can’t show weakness in front of Master Philo or the Defenders. I must be a professional if I am to be taken seriously. I must move on to the next task*.

Once my body was clean, I braided my hair and hurried into my room to change.

I descended the stairs wearing a brown coat over a white shirt with trousers and my new sneaking boots. They squeaked when I walked, but that would change in time. I met Master Philo at the door.

“The king requests you return to your room and get a full night’s rest, my lady,” he said with a wrinkled brow.

“I respectfully decline.”

Master Philo shrugged. “As you wish. Where would you like to begin?”

“I need to visit the garrison first,” I said, reaching for the doorknob. Cool air met me once the door was opened. Taking a deep breath, I stepped out into the night.

“Yes, of course,” Master Philo said, following me out and then walking past me. “This way.”

We set out across the ward and around the spring.

“Can you walk me through your procedures?” I asked, keeping pace with him. “What are the guards’ schedules like?”

“As you can imagine, we have two shifts; one during the day and

one at night. Guards are posted along both walls, in the towers along the hill's incline, and in strategic places on the wards themselves." He gestured to three guards we could see marching along the ward. "They trade places periodically so no one soldier is left pacing the same stretch of land for too long."

I nodded. "It would keep them more alert to be on the move."

"Yes, it was my belief as well." Master Philo clasped his hands behind his back. "The guards that patrol the wards also check for documentation plaques every day and report any incidents between the counselors or royal families that might be suspicious. I have those reports in my office if you ever wish to see them."

"Thank you. Samir said a plaque was being made for me?"

"Yes, my lady. It will be delivered to you tomorrow morning. Defenders' plaques are smaller than the average, so they don't get in the way during a scrimmage."

"Again, thank you," I said with a bow of my head.

Master Philo nodded to one of the guards posted outside the garrison, who opened the door for us. Men milled about, trading their swords for the ones on wooden racks, selecting new pieces of armor from enormous chests, plucking shields and bows off hooks on the wall, selecting new spears from barrels in the corner, experimentally swiping swords or axes through the air, muttering amongst themselves. Servants sat at grinding stones, sharpening swords and axes, or at tables, cleaning, waxing, and tending to dents in various pieces of armor. A lively fire cracked in an open hearth at the center of it all.

Upon seeing us enter the room, many saluted or stood at attention.

"Good evening, men," Master Philo said.

"Good evening, sir!" they chorused.

"Lady Warrior," many added with respectful bobs of their heads.

I nodded back before meandering over to a display of daggers, short swords, and scabbards. I selected a dagger and some throwing knives. When I found the one that felt best in the palm of my hand—a blade as long as my forearm—I strapped it to my thigh. The men made way for me as I approached the racks of swords. I belted on a beautiful piece of metal that was perfectly balanced and had a simple leather-bound hilt.

"Ready," I said, finding my way back to Master Philo.

He gestured to the door and we exited together.

As we walked, he shot a concerned glance at me out of the corner of his eye. "I remember the first man I ever killed on the job. It doesn't get any easier."

"Are these supposed to be words of comfort?" I asked, bristling at

the thought that I could be so transparent to someone who hardly knew me.

He smiled a gentle little smile. “I meant no offense, my lady. Just know that you’re not alone. Find a way to live with what you’ve done. The king needs us at our best.”

I nodded again, shoving my hands in my pockets.

We ambled down the steps to the lower ward, passing several servants carrying baskets of dirty laundry.

“I imagine you have many, many guards under your employ,” I said to disrupt the cloud of awkward silence. “Have you any assistants?”

The guard master scrunched his lips to the side. “I have one. Why do you ask?”

“I know another member of Dotharr’s anointed who is looking for employment,” I said with a shrug. “He was nominated for King’s Defender.”

Master Philo raised his eyebrows.

“He barely lost to me,” I added quickly. “He’s a good man, a great fighter, and a fiercely loyal friend. If you think you could use someone like that…”

“We can *always* use more men like that. I’ll send him an invitation for an interview.”

I thanked him yet again.

“Did you want to walk along this wall or visit the guards at the portcullis at the bottom of the hill?” he asked, gesturing to the gate up ahead.

I squared my shoulders. “Let’s start at the bottom and work our way up.”

It was perhaps three hours before dawn when I returned to the king’s home, carrying more scrolls. These were the patrol schedules for the next two months and lists of the names of every guard, counselor, servant, child, and royal family member on the grounds. I had a lot of studying to do, but I felt better prepared. Now, I would take an hour to study the scrolls and the designs in my bedroom before I napped. Then I would inquire about the king’s schedule and perhaps steal some bread from the kitchen.

Lennart and Gabor met me on the porch.

“We needed you well-rested to watch the king today,” Gabor grumbled. “How do you expect to do well when you—?”

I shoved the scrolls into his chest. “Hold these.”

He swore and scrambled to catch the parchment leaves that escaped.

I struck Lennart across the face. He must have anticipated the

blow because he hardly stumbled.

Wiping the fresh blood from his lips, he regarded me with bored, half lidded eyes. “Was that necessary?”

“You knew about the general’s test. Don’t deny it. Defenders can’t afford to react so slowly when the king is threatened,” I said. “If you ever withhold pertinent information from me again, I will challenge you to a grappling match in front of all the guards on this hill and publically humiliate you. Do you understand me?”

Gabor sneered. “You should take her up on that offer and teach her a lesson in humility, Len.”

“How am I to discern what information would be pertinent to you?” Lennart asked with a shrewd smile. “I can’t very well convey every rumor and request I come across. You would be bored to tears.”

“How about this?” I hooked a thumb in Gabor’s direction. “Anything job-related that you’d tell this oaf can be shared with me as well.”

Gabor dropped my scrolls. “You watch your mouth! I’m not afraid to strike a woman.”

I rolled my eyes. “I graduated from *warrior* academy. I’ve been struck by a man before. That would hardly make you brave.”

Lennart raised a hand before Gabor could reply. “She’s right.” He bowed his head just slightly. “I apologize on behalf of myself and my colleague. Now that we know you’re serious, you will be treated with the same professionalism and respect as any other Defender.”

I doubted that very much but I thanked him nonetheless.

“Finley will be at your disposal this afternoon if you have any questions concerning your assignment,” Lennart went on to say. “Hemming will relieve you at midnight tonight. Good day to you.”

Gabor stomped on my scrolls as he left. “Happy studying.”

Lennart rolled his eyes at his friend before following him down the front steps and across the ward.

I suppressed a scream of frustration and bent to retrieve my scrolls. I walked into the house as quietly as possible and crept up the stairs. The portraits on the small table upstairs caught my eye again. I carefully laid down my scrolls and picked up one of the portraits. The woman in the painting had brown eyes and Torvald’s long, slender nose. On his face, the nose was proportionate. Unfortunately, it seemed rather large on her face. But in her eyes I could see the same fierce kindness Torvald had portrayed in the coliseum, and that made her stunningly beautiful. She had a mane of curly blond hair that cascaded down her shoulders, and bodacious curves. I assumed this was Torvald’s mother. She must have been mentioned in my history class once or twice but, for the life of me, I couldn’t remember her name.

I returned the portrait to its proper place and ventured down the hall to deposit the scrolls in my bedroom. Then I crept over to the king's side of the building. If there was ever a time for investigating the king, it was now while everyone was asleep. Torvald had his own drawing room, a library, a room filled with portraits, ceremonial weapons and armor, a music room, a closet larger than any I had ever seen, an office, and a washroom.

I searched every room thoroughly and found nothing to prove the king had a secret, malicious nature. There were no hidden rooms filled with tortured animals or maps with big red Xs on them. Nor were there jars of blood or a whore in chains. The desk drawers in his office were locked but I managed to get into them thanks to my lock-picking tools. I thumbed through the documents stored neatly in each file, finding accounts of the Quest for Resources. I also found accounts from the diplomats that had been sent with General Halvar.

There were pages upon pages detailing meetings with the mainland ambassadors, the occasional attack from a rebel group that wasn't interested in negotiating trade, the amount of money being extracted from the royal treasury to pay for the militia's living expenses, and trade route agreements, along with lists of items that were being sent to the island every few months. Each record was dated and signed by three different hands. I studied the handwriting, finding distinct differences. I shoved the pages back into their files with a snort of disgust. A portrait of the king shaking hands with a man with green eyes and formal attire sat on the desk's surface. A signed note at the bottom of the portrait identified the man as an emissary from the mainland.

I uttered a harsh laugh.

Well, that answered my earlier question. Could the general be so smart and sneaky as to deceive his king completely and without suspicion? Yes, apparently he could be. But in order to pull off such a lie, he had to have help. The emissary for instance couldn't possibly be who he said he was. Perhaps he was a hired actor from Holger? An old friend of the general's willing to do him a favor? Or perhaps he was a captive from the mainland, too terrified not to obey the general's commands.

And the diplomats! Did they have no loyalty to their king? How could they join Halvar in his deceit? Were they afraid of him? Or did they perhaps try to rebel against the general's plot and were replaced by letter-writers who *would* obey? Did the king meet with his ambassadors at all? I gritted my teeth. There was so much I still didn't know.

I put everything back in its proper location and crept out of the office. There was still one more place I could look. I snuck into

Torvald's bedroom. If he woke to find me snooping, I could always use the excuse that I was making sure no one was lying in wait to slit his throat. Still, I moved carefully and soundlessly, all the while straining my ears for any movement coming from the hall. I checked under the table, behind the couches, around the potted plants, and even under the bed for any fake walls, loose floorboards, or levers. I came up empty handed yet again.

I paused for a moment to watch Torvald sleep. He seemed boyish, curled up under the colossal blankets, hair standing straight on end, face flushed from the fire roaring in the fireplace. Discouraged as I was over my lack of proof, there was also some measure of relief to know that I was working for a man who was truly in the dark about the general's crimes. I no longer had to doubt his character or question his words.

I retreated to my bedroom, suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion. Dagmar sat on my bed in the dark, waiting for me. I bit my tongue to keep from screaming. When I had recovered from my scare, I scowled at her. "What are you doing awake at this hour? Why are you here?"

"You ruined your evening gown," she said through stiff lips. "You left your shoes in the foyer and, worst of all, you insulted the master! What have you to say for yourself?"

I sat in the plush chair that wasn't already being occupied by scrolls, and bent to unlace my boots. "It was a rough night."

Dagmar snorted. "Is that all?"

I tugged off a boot and tossed it aside. "I didn't have time to remove my shoes and place them in a more proper place when the king was being fired upon. I needed to apprehend the attacker before he could make his escape. My attire tonight was not meant for running. May I suggest that you clothe me with a tear-away gown for the next meal?"

I could almost see the smoke coming out of Dagmar's ears.

"I am your handmaiden, not your seamstress. If normal lady attire is inadequate for your profession, I suggest you talk to your seamstress immediately and specify your needs to *her*. And the next time you slay a human being like a sacrificial lamb, wear an apron!"

"I didn't slay… Oh, never mind!" I tugged my second boot off, trying and failing to rein in my temper. "With all due respect, ma'am, I'm tired and still have a lot of work to do. I can't apologize for circumstances that were out of my control. I did the best that I could. As for upsetting the king, understand that I didn't intend to but he was treating me like a delicate flower, like a child. If I am to become the Defender he needs, I must suffer sleepless nights… Among other unpleasant things."

Dagmar sighed deeply and rose from the bed. “Is there anything I can get you?”

I blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“If you intend to stay up all night, I must as well,” she said, scowling. “Would you like something to eat?”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to—”

“Would you like something to eat?” she repeated, her voice cold as steel.

I decided not to fight her on this and simply nodded. Dagmar retreated, presumably to scrounge what she could from the kitchen. I sat on the floor beside the chairs and tea table, rubbed the sleepiness from my eyes, and unrolled the first scroll. My handmaiden returned a little while later with a platter of hot tea and dinner leftovers, and placed it on the table.

“Thank you,” I said. “Can I trouble you for some parchment and a quill?”

When Dagmar shook me awake, there was light in the room and not from the fire. “The master will be waking soon. You must meet him in the nook for breakfast.”

I had managed to fall asleep while sitting on the ground and leaning on the table. I yawned and stretched.

“Do you need assistance changing into suitable attire?” Dagmar asked.

I ran a hand over my face and peeked at my bed. “That depends. What did you pick out for me?” A cream-colored blouse and a long black skirt embroidered with a golden flower pattern had been laid over the blankets. My shiny new documentation plaque was there as well. I smiled. “I’ll manage.”

“All right then. I’ll just be fixing your hair before I retire,” my handmaiden said.

It took her five minutes to braid a small section of my hair, knead the rest of it into a bun, and twist the braid around the base of the bun, leaving only a few wisps of hair by my ears and the nape of my neck. Then she wished me a good morning and left the room. While it had been helpful to have her at my beck and call last night, I was glad she was finally going to rest. It appeared her job was going to be as grueling as mine.

Once changed into my ‘suitable’ clothes, I slipped into nicer shoes, put pearl earrings into my ears, slipped the plaque and its string over my head, and washed my face at the basin of water by my bed. I pressed the warm towel to my face and the back of my neck, mentally preparing myself for the day.

The pages Dagmar had found for me last night were half full of

notes about the designs of the grounds and I still had to copy down the guards' schedules. I didn't know how I was going to remember everyone's names short of reading the lists every night. But I couldn't allow myself to be discouraged. It was only my second day on the job after all.

I shoved a dagger into my boot, carefully weaved a throwing knife into my bun, and strapped a long blade to my thigh before leaving my room. I caught a servant in the hall and asked him to send a message to Thora.

"If you could ask her to apply these alterations to all of my gowns, I would appreciate it," I added, handing him a folded piece of paper on which I'd drawn an example of my request. "And here." I gave him the coin purse with what was left of my allowance. "Give her this for her trouble. Thank her for me as well."

The servant bowed and left to do as I asked.

I walked around the staircase toward the front door, having spotted the archway leading to the nook when I trudged in last night. It was subtle, almost hidden. A cushioned bench curved along the circumference of the room and a mahogany table sat at its center. There was a blue vase on the table with white and yellow flowers. The tall, rectangular windows were adorned with cream and yellow drapes. There was a secondary door across from the circular room where servants hurried in and out with food and drink. I smelled ham, eggs, buttered toast, jam, oatmeal, assorted fruit, and three different kinds of juice.

King Torvald sat among his cushions, holding a cup of juice with one hand and turning the page of a novel with the other. The book was propped open by a wooden stand a safe distance away from the food.

He was different without his crown. Humble though it was, the crown still held power. He could pass as an ordinary gentleman enjoying an early breakfast alone if it weren't for the number of servants he had, the fine china he ate from, and the crimson velvet waistcoat he wore over his shirt.

The king looked up as if finally sensing my presence and then stood. "Good morning, Lady Isa."

I dipped into a curtsey. "Your Majesty."

He gestured to the bench across from him. "Please, sit."

No sooner had my bottom settled onto the cushion than my empty plate was replaced by one full of food. Juice was poured into my goblet. I blinked and the servants were gone. Torvald sat, carefully pushing the book and its stand aside.

"What were you reading?" I asked. I found myself feeling guilty for doubting his character and thinking such awful things about him.

Suddenly, I wanted to make up for it all.

He smiled and shrugged. “A book on economics. It’s schoolwork for a ruler. Dreadfully boring, but instructive.”

“What would you read if you could read whatever you wanted?”

He shrugged. “Mystery, horror and intrigue, sonnets.”

I had stumbled upon many poetry books in his library while snooping last night, but pretended to be surprised. “You enjoy sonnets?”

“It isn’t something a man should admit to but, yes, I do. From time to time.”

“My father once said a well-rounded man is a true man,” I said. “You shouldn’t be ashamed of your sonnets, my lord. They make you well rounded.”

The king bowed his head with a smile. We ate in silence for a moment before he spoke again. “I apologize if I offended you last night. Being what you are, you must not be used to others caring for you. But I’m still struggling to see the warrior behind the lady. It has become second nature for me to… take care of everyone.”

I looked up from cutting my slab of ham to see him watching me with a wrinkle between his eyes.

“My bodyguards have always been men. It was easier to allow them to run themselves ragged because that’s what all the other guards do. That’s their job.” His frown deepened. “I don’t know if I’m making any sense.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” I said, eager to make nice. “I was too quick to take offense. You’re right; I’m not accustomed to being cared for. We both have some adjustments to make, but I do appreciate your ability to see the lady before the warrior.”

“I’m sorry about General Halvar.”

I tensed.

“It isn’t like him to be so severe. At your graduation ceremony and then last night with his test… It’s almost as if the idea of your ferocity brings out the worst in him.” He shook his head and sent me an apologetic look. “Not to say it’s your fault, because it most certainly isn’t. I’ll talk to him at the meeting today. You’re my Defender, yes, but you’re also a guest here. Your comfort is important to me. I won’t have him behaving like a beast every time he comes to visit. You must be able to get along.”

“My lord,” I said, perhaps harsher than I intended, “do you know what I was called before I was enrolled in the academy?”

Torvald’s brow furrowed. “I wasn’t aware that you had a name other than the one you go by.”

“They give every student a new name at the academy, one more befitting a warrior. Before I was Isa of Holger, I was Asta of

Kenshore." I let that sink in.

A flicker of surprise crossed his face. "Kenshore? How did you come to be here?"

"Roughly a year ago, General Halvar's ship, *The Great Disaster*, set anchor near the shores of my hometown," I said, rage making my voice waver. "He and his men attacked my village without warning, burning and killing everything and everyone in their path."

The king shook his head. "That's not possible. Halvar and his militia are only there to defend my representatives."

My world grew misty. I blinked and took a swing of juice before continuing. "I was spared by chance. I was tossed out of my carriage and knocked unconscious by the crowd fleeing for their lives. The barbarian raiders must have thought me dead because they left me alone." Grief built around my throat, making it hard to speak. But I had the king's attention. I needed to take advantage of this moment.

With great difficulty, I looked him in the eye and took a deep breath. "I awoke to find myself surrounded by soldiers. I don't know when my eyes changed color. The last time I'd seen my reflection had been earlier that morning. But when I was thrown at General Halvar's feet, he saw my eyes were glowing and took it as a sign from Dotharr. *That's* why I'm here. *That's* why he and I will never be able to get along. I know you respect him, my lord, but the first chance I get, I will kill him."

Torvald's jaw dropped.

Tears rolled down my cheeks and splashed onto the fists clenched in my lap. "If that hurts you, if it means you must punish me… I'm sorry, but nothing you could possibly say or do can hinder my mission."

A servant came to refill the king's cup. I dabbed at my eyes and blew my nose with my napkin. And still he didn't say a word. He simply stared at me, mouth agape, eyes wide. Then he fell back against his cushions. "Isa… Asta, you're asking me to believe you over a man I've known for many years," he said softly. "I don't want to accuse you of lying. I don't want to think you capable of making up such a tale, but please understand it's difficult for me to accept that Halvar has been lying to me."

I swallowed my outrage and tried to be rational. "My lord, if I had only just met the general yesterday, what reason would I have to sully his reputation?"

Torvald shrugged. "That test of his would have upset anyone."

Aggravation made my words brittle. "General Halvar is a man of influence and power here on the island. Would I risk your wrath, the counselors' scorn, and the general's persecution over a test I didn't appreciate? Would anyone?"

The king regarded me thoughtfully, almost fearfully. After what seemed like an eternity, he nodded. “I’ll have an investigation conducted to prove your claims against the general. It will be discreet. No one will know apart from the two of us and the spies I will pay to report back to me of the general’s actions on foreign soil.”

I relaxed, but only just. “Any documentation he’s provided to prove his story and any men claiming to be ambassadors for the mainland should also be scrutinized. This elaborate lie would need accomplices.”

“Yes, of course,” the king murmured distractedly. He shook his head, anger making his jaw clench. “If what you say is true, then my people’s chances of peaceful emigration and my chances of forming any sort of alliance with our sister nations have been ruined, perhaps forever, because of the actions of one man. And, if that’s the case, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Chapter Seventeen

After breakfast, King Torvald ventured upstairs for his crown. I wasn't sure how to feel about our conversation. I suppose if he had reacted in a fit of rage or if he had believed me immediately and given me permission to murder his general, he wouldn't be the good, reasonable man he seemed to be. As I waited for him by the front door, I concluded that this morning had gone as well as it could have.

When Torvald descended, he was still frowning and thoughtful.

"I'm sorry I ruined your morning," I said, and I meant it. Earlier I had been so caught up in sharing my story and receiving justice that I'd given little thought as to how my information would affect him.

"I've just asked my errand man to deliver a stack of documents given to me by the general along with a sample of writing from each diplomat to Ishem's School of Science," he said. "There is an instructor there I trust who can prudently handle the testing of the texts' credibility. I haven't told this man everything, only that I want to make certain of who wrote the documents. It may be that my representatives are working with the general in this but, if not, I'd like to know right away."

"What do we know about the mainland emissaries?" I asked. "Have their stories been verified?"

The king ran a hand over his face. "There hasn't been a reason to doubt them until now. I suppose I could write to them, but the general carries any messages from the island to the mainland whenever he comes to visit. If he opens my letter and learns that I suspect him…"

"That wouldn't be good," I agreed. "Can we be sure the emissaries you met with aren't from Holger?"

Torvald chewed on the question while fiddling with his cufflinks. "I could give their descriptions to my spy master and have him ask questions around the city, but it's doubtful. Halvar has been careful to make his ruse seem legitimate. I don't go into the city too often but the counselors do. The general wouldn't risk one of them running into his imposters."

"Thank you," I said, causing him to straighten up in surprise. "I dropped this problem in your lap rather unceremoniously and you've been so quick to attempt to validate my claim."

The king's face softened. "I don't know much about you, Lady Isa… I mean, Asta. Sorry."

I smiled. "It's fine. You can call me whatever you want."

"To keep up with appearances I think I'll call you Isa," he decided before he continued. "You're my bodyguard; I'm to trust you with my life, so I must trust you in everything else. I admit I'm struggling with

the knowledge you've given me. I wish you hadn't told me, but I understand why you did…" He grimaced. "Until we find substantial proof, we must keep this between us." He gave himself a shake and smiled. "Shall we take a walk before the meeting?"

I nodded and we ventured outside. The ward was dotted with servants dashing to and fro. Children, both royal and not, hurried to school. A group of well-dressed men and women took a stroll around the spring with a handful of servants holding their parasols. It was a beautiful fall morning.

The king directed me to the large stone steps leading to the lower ward. "I'd like to check in on Haskell. If our talk at the dinner table last night doesn't improve his behavior, I'll have to think of a suitable punishment."

"Has he no other father figure that he respects?" I asked. "Perhaps the fact that you're his brother taints your authority in his eyes."

The king shook his head. "Helka won't marry. She claims my father was the only man she ever loved. Bodil married Polk three years ago, but to the day I don't like the man. I'm worried he's only interested in the crown's money. But she loves him dearly, so I've refrained from ordering an investigation. He hardly parents Raoul. I'm truly the only fatherly figure my siblings have."

We walked down the steps, across the chapel, and to the school building. The king acknowledged every child who bowed or wished him a good morning. A couple of nervous bows and curtsies were aimed my way. I nodded and smiled to quell their nerves. Torvald stopped at one of the classroom doors and peeked in through the small window. The woman teaching spotted him, excused herself, and exited the room. The king smiled and stepped back to allow the teacher to enter the hallway. She looked to be our age, with blond hair twisted into a bun at the back of her head, and green eyes. She wore a dark purple dress with a white apron over it. She curtsied before the king.

"Good morning to you, my lord," she said.

"Good morning, Kalea," Torvald said. "I'm sorry to disrupt your class."

Kalea rolled her eyes, a smile tugging at her lips. "You know full well you're welcome to disrupt my class any day. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I came because of my brother."

"He told you about the incident, did he?" Kalea asked, raising her eyebrows.

"From our conversation last night, I assumed he had been spying on and throwing various objects at his classmates from the bell tower again. Is there another incident I should know about?"

The young teacher glanced over her shoulder and through the window in the door, as if looking for Haskell among her students. “He was doing that yesterday, yes, but he was aiming the objects at one particular individual.”

The king frowned. “Who?”

“Mabel, daughter of Counselor Odalis.”

Torvald relaxed. “Ah, yes. According to Evie, Haskell has had his eye on Mabel for some time. I’ll apologize to her and her parents later this evening. Thank you for telling me.”

Kalea nodded. “Of course, sire.” As if finally noticing me, she smiled. “Who is this that accompanies you, my lord?”

The king turned to me, a bit sheepish. “My apologies. This is Lady Isa, my new bodyguard. Isa, this is Kalea, the daughter of Counselor Rakim, my most trusted advisor.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, miss,” I said.

“The pleasure is mine. I never thought a woman would be chosen by Dotharr in my lifetime.” Kalea took my hand and shook it vigorously. “I’m truly honored!”

“And how long have you known the king?” I asked because their manner toward each other was so informal.

“We grew up together here on the royal grounds. We terrorized our teacher in this very classroom when we were children.” Torvald shot Kalea a sly look. “Dare I call you my friend after the island’s anniversary celebration two years ago?”

Kalea laughed. “I forgave you a long time ago for that particular disaster, sire. It’s safe to call me your friend.”

The king smirked. “Then why must I beg you, once again, to call me Torvald?”

“Because my mother still scolds me whenever she catches me being so… familiar with Holger’s ruler.”

“How *is* your mother?”

“Much better now, thank you. The medicine Dr. Ichiro prescribed performed miracles.”

“Glad to hear it. Well, I won’t keep you from your students any longer. If Haskell misbehaves again, do tell me.”

“I will. It was nice to chat with you for a while. You should disrupt my class more often.” Kalea smiled at me. “I’m glad to have met you. I hope to become better acquainted with you in the future, my lady.” After a curtsey for me and a wink for Torvald, Kalea returned to her class.

The king snapped his fingers. “That’s right! Today is her birthday. I must send her flowers.” He ventured out of the school building with me at his heels. “I’ll have to ask Darnell what I sent her last year.”

“Darnell?”

“My errand man,” Torvald said. “I think it was daffodils and tulips but I can’t be sure…”

The foundation and skeletal structure of the meeting hall were built of stone, but the walls were entirely made of glass. Even from a distance, one could see exactly what was happening in each room except for the few that were curtained off with thick drapes. The king held the door open for me and I walked in.

The lobby’s front desk was a stone counter set a step or two higher than necessary. The woman who sat behind the desk and smiled at us had to look down to meet our eyes even from a distance. Two pillars of stone stood at either end of the room and continued on all the way up to the roof. The floors were made of marble and had lush rugs thrown over them. Comfortable chairs and small tables were stationed on both sides of the room where those waiting for a meeting with the king or the counselors could mingle. There were servants offering refreshments. I was surprised to see people from both the noble and the poor societies waiting to be seen. Children dressed in their best clothes huddled close to their mothers.

“Do you meet with everyone?” I asked.

“The counselors handle most of the visitations during the week,” was the king’s reply. “I only handle the serious cases, but all are welcome to bring their petitions before me once a week in the throne room.”

At the sight of their king, all stood to bow. The guards who had been lingering by the door came to stand before us, warily eyeing the people. But Torvald wasn’t concerned. He smiled and waved graciously as we walked across the lobby. Whispers broke out when the people noticed me.

“Is that his bride-to-be? She’s beautiful.”

“Her eyes glow! Does that mean she’s his bodyguard?”

“Why would Dotharr choose a woman to be a warrior?”

“Why would the king allow a woman to put herself in harm’s way for him?”

I flushed, glad Torvald’s hearing wasn’t as acute as mine. We ascended the stairs to a more private waiting area. The men who lounged in the chairs were clothed in pale yellow robes, marking them as counselors. They came to greet the king but stopped short when they saw me.

An older man with ashy blond hair was the first to recover. He smiled. “We were not aware that a lady would be joining us today, my lord.”

“Good morning to you too, Rakim.”

So this is Kalea’s father. It took me a moment to see the resemblance. It was in the placement of the eyes and the curve of his

mouth.

The king raised his voice. “Gentlemen, this is Lady Isa and she will be accompanying me everywhere from now on, just like all my other Defenders. Does anyone have an issue with this?”

Uncomfortable silence followed.

A middle-aged man with bright red hair stepped forth. “We mean no disrespect, sire.” He nodded at me. “My lady. But our constitution clearly states—”

The king’s frown caused the gentleman to stop talking immediately.

He cleared his throat and stepped back. “Of course, we can review the constitution at another time.”

“Let’s begin,” the king said.

Counselor Rakim walked closely beside Torvald as we journeyed to the meeting chamber. “We’re still waiting on General Halvar, sire.”

The king smirked. “You know he arrives late on purpose. He hates these meetings. We can begin without him this time.”

Counselor Rakim nodded. “As you wish.”

The meeting chamber consisted of a long rectangular table with fifty lavish chairs and an enormous fireplace. The glass wall that faced the waiting area was covered by drapes but the one across was clear, giving us a view of the ward. The king walked over to a chair that had been tucked in the corner, and carried it over to the head of the table. He gestured for me to sit. I felt every eye on us as I did. I doubted I would ever get used to that.

Once everyone was seated and the king had settled into the chair beside me, Counselor Rakim began to report. “Thanks to the agreements made with our sister nations, our coal and oil supplies have doubled in the last year. The southern section of the island will outlast the winter.”

The king leaned over to whisper in my ear, “The southern section is home to the more impoverished families of our population.”

“What does Holger give in return for these supplies?” I asked.

“Craftsmen’s goods,” the king replied. “We have nothing else.”

I had to wonder what the general was doing with all that merchandise.

The king turned to Counselor Rakim. “This is good news. What of the extra order of blankets and food we discussed to be distributed to the southern section?”

“General Halvar brought a cargo of a thousand sheep, my lord,” another counselor said.

The king shook his head. “That won’t be enough.”

“We’ll do what we can, sire,” a third counselor vowed.

“As for the extra food you requested, it would require rationing

the food here," Counselor Rakim said.

The king didn't hesitate. "Then it will be done."

The counselors exchanged miserable glances but didn't argue.

"The jobs created to provide the families of the southern section with substantial income are proving problematic," Rakim said, continuing his report. "We're running out of streets and buildings to renovate, sire."

"The emigration should give them a fresh start," the king said.

Rakim nodded. "Thanks to your efforts, we have interviewed and gathered fifty families who are willing to move to our newly-purchased provinces in the sister nations. We await the end of winter to send them on their way."

The next hour continued in the same manner, with different counselors reporting on various aspects of life on the island. The king didn't hesitate to explain things that might confuse me. He was quick to make suggestions to resolve conflicts, referencing books he had read and techniques that had worked for his grandfather in the past. And he always asked for Counselor Rakim's opinion.

"He's seen three kings come and go," Torvald explained. "He has an idea or two about what works and what doesn't."

Meanwhile, I noted the number of doors and the distance between the windows and the table. I kept close watch on the buildings across from ours, and the people mingling in the ward. I practiced blocking out nearby voices and focusing on the sounds in the stories above and below us. And then my name was mentioned.

I looked up to see everyone watching me. I was about to apologize for not paying attention when the king spoke up.

"Anything you have to tell me can be said in her presence," he said with a hard edge in his tone.

The counselors shifted nervously in their seats.

I stood. "It's all right, Your Majesty. I can wait outside."

King Torvald opened his mouth to protest but I put a hand on his shoulder. He blinked in surprise. I squeezed gently and smiled before taking my leave. Perhaps that had been too familiar a move considering we had only met yesterday, but I couldn't very well take it back. I stood by the door and pretended to watch passersby. All the while I listened to what was being said in the meeting room.

"This is a new predicament we're in," someone said. "We were under the impression that this Defender would be a man, just like the rest. The rules this council and yourself have made… they no longer apply because she's a woman."

"That *woman* graduated from Dotharr's Academy with honors," the king said. "That *woman* has undergone the same rigorous training as every other Defender who has come to work for me. Even General

Halvar was impressed with her skill. There is no one better suited for this position."

"It isn't a question of skill, my lord," a different man said. "Please, don't take offense. It is only that… Ours is an old-fashioned culture. Our people expect certain things from their king. We counselors would like to promote a positive image of Your Majesty, one of honor and purity."

"Yes? So?" the king asked tersely.

"She is living under your roof, my lord," a third man murmured. "Sharing a home with a woman who isn't your wife… We only seek to preserve the king's good reputation."

Torvald scoffed. "Her eyes glow. Anyone who has any sense will look at her and know she's a warrior."

"She is a phenomenon, my lord. They might not know what to make of her. I know I personally struggle to understand why Dotharr would choose a woman to serve him. The work of a warrior is dangerous and uncivilized. It is not a life meant for a lady. The people could take one look at her and think her a fluke, an attempt to convince the world that you are guarded at all times when in *reality* you are—"

"I'm what?" the king challenged. "Parading around my prostitute?"

"Sire, please don't be upset," another said.

"This is ridiculous! What would you have me do? Marry her?"

My stomach dropped in dread when the sarcastic question was met by silence.

The king made a choking sound. "You can't be serious. We hardly know each other! I couldn't force her into matrimony."

"With all due respect, my lord, you can ask whatever you want of her," Counselor Rakim said. "You are the king."

"I'm the king, yes. So I can refuse to agree to this outrageous suggestion."

Multiple sighs sounded across the room.

"It is possible," one said, "that she may not live very long."

"Don't," the king barked. "Don't you dare!"

"I apologize, my lord. I only meant to reassure you by pointing out that this marriage could be temporary. Once she has passed, you can have your pick of the women of Holger."

Torvald practically bit off the words, "If you think I'm only concerned about my happiness, Cade, you don't know me at all! This woman has been through enough. I refuse to make this choice for her. I will select a bride, and she'll be a woman who doesn't already carry more weight than she should."

I took a step back, shocked and touched despite myself.

“Your Majesty, this council was appointed to ensure that the king did what was in the best interest of the people,” Counselor Rakim said gently. “We have told you what we believe would be best for your people in this circumstance. And, like it or not, you need an heir. From what we have witnessed, your Lady Warrior is a beautiful and respectful woman. Because she is blessed by Dotharr when no other member of her gender has been, she is a worthy candidate to carry your seed.”

“She has been trained to be my Defender,” the king said. “Is she expected to continue fighting for me while she carries my child?”

“A temporary replacement could be chosen from Dotharr’s Academy to guard you, your wife, and your child until Lady Isa is well enough to resume her duties,” Rakim suggested.

“This proposition is becoming more and more ridiculous,” Torvald said with a scoff.

“It is in your power to refuse any suggestion we make, but please don’t forget why we do and say what we do. At least consider our proposal, sire.”

I stood up straighter when I saw General Halvar at the stairs. He gave me a cold smile as he approached. The uniform he wore today was red. From a distance, he appeared to be bathed in blood.

“They allowed you to skip the meeting, did they?” he said when he was near.

“I don’t think they realize I can still hear them,” I said, forcing myself to be cordial.

The general rolled his eyes. “Fools. Have they finished going over the budget cuts and financial numbers? That is the absolute worst part of every meeting.”

I crossed my arms and leaned back against the wall. “If your business in this peaceful Quest for Resources is purely the security of the king’s diplomats, why are you reporting to the counselors? Wouldn’t that be the job of a representative?”

General Halvar smirked. “The king’s diplomats are much too busy parleying with the other nations to travel all the way back to Holger to give their statements. As their humble guard master, it falls upon me to deliver their reports to the king.” He produced a bundle of letters held together by a cord. “My militia and I hardly ever have to step in these days. I wouldn’t have anything to do if I was relieved of my messenger duties.”

My hands tightened into fists under my armpits. “I’m sure you’re just dying of boredom overseas.”

The general’s lip curled. “Notice how I’m not trembling in fear of being discovered? You are not a threat to me.”

“Keep saying that,” I said. “Perhaps one day you might come to

believe it."

He tugged the door open. No sooner had the door shut behind him before he began to speak. "You do realize the Lady Warrior has been gifted with extraordinary senses, don't you? If you don't want her to know what you're saying, you should send her to the garrison."

The king swore under his breath. I sprinted to a chair on the other side of the waiting room, sat, and pretended to be engrossed by whatever was going on outside. The king poked his head out the door.

"Are they ready for me to come back in?" I asked innocently.

King Torvald blushed. "Not quite." Then he rejoined the others, letting the door shut behind him.

Chapter Eighteen

The general wasn't filled in on the council's "outrageous suggestion." He was brought up to speed on how the supplies were helping Holger and thanked for his efforts overseas. Then he reported of his progress; how long it would take for the provinces to be ready for Holger's immigrants, how the soldiers were faring, circumstances in which compromise had been successful, and circumstances when he had, unfortunately, had to use excessive force.

There had been an incident involving a city in the country of Oreth, Kenshore's neighbor to the west. According to the general, there had been a revolt even after the authorities had agreed to the terms Holger's diplomats had suggested. Halvar reported that a quarter of his militia had been killed in a night raid and he would need additional troops to avenge his fallen soldiers. The counselors didn't hesitate to accommodate him.

When the king's opinion was asked, he inquired about the accounts of his representatives, which the general quickly handed over. Once Torvald had read the report that supposedly proved the general's story, he agreed to send volunteers from Dotharr's Academy.

It's a perfect cover for those spies he wanted to send, I thought.

"Halvar," the king said, "when might I be able to meet with the ambassadors from the mainland for our annual assembly?"

"Soon, my lord. They're too pampered to travel during the winter. They will wait until spring."

"Are you sure I can't meet them on their own soil yet?" Torvald asked. "It's been many years since we secured the allegiance of the countries along the coast."

"Along the coast, yes," Halvar said. "It's the countries further inland that are proving to be more problematic. I won't give them an opportunity to harm you."

The meeting was then adjourned. Everyone filed out of the room in groups of twos and threes. The general shook hands with King Torvald and promised the counselors more supplies. The counselors in turn wished him luck and safety. Apparently, he was headed back out to sea that afternoon. The general made his leave, smirking in my direction as he strolled out. I couldn't relax until the stench of pride had finally left the building.

Someday, I had to remind myself. *Someday soon…*

The king bid his counselors good day and, with a furtive glance in my direction, marched down the stairs. I hurried after him. Once outside, it was obvious he was upset. Anxious lines appeared on his forehead and concern drew his mouth to the side. Learning of the

general's deceit and being asked to marry his Defender in the same day must have been taking its toll. I walked with him to the stables, chewing on my lips. I wanted to say something, anything, but I was afraid it would only make the situation more awkward.

"Your Majesty," one of the stable hands said, meeting us at the door. "This is a pleasant surprise. Would you like us to ready your horse?"

"That won't be necessary. Thank you," Torvald said, walking purposefully down the aisle between the stalls.

The stable hand followed us. "Shall we call for some riding gear? You're not properly dressed for—"

The king swiveled around, forced a smile. "I'm in desperate need of some sunshine and quiet, master stableman. Please forgive my urgency, but I *must* be going."

The stable hand bowed. "Yes, my lord. I apologize for keeping you." Then he retreated.

The king's smile vanished as soon as the youth had gone. He nudged open the door of a stall belonging to a black mare. The horse whinnied and came forward to greet its master. Torvald wrapped his arms around the creature's neck and buried his face in its mane. "Save me, Inger."

"She's amazing," I said.

He rubbed the horse's ears. "I've had her since she was a foal. She'll let no one ride her but me."

"What a steadfast companion."

The king left his horse to lift the polished saddle from the wall. "Do you ride, Lady Isa?"

"I do."

He threw the saddle over his horse's back, then gestured to the stalls around us. "Take your pick."

I gawked at the selection. Tall and short, painted and single-colored, mixed and purebreds… I didn't know where to begin. Considering none were acquainted with me, I thought I'd stay away from the temperamental purebreds. A shy painted horse five stalls away caught my eye. I snagged a handful of straw from one of the other horses' stalls and slowly approached the painted horse. She stepped back at the sight of an unfamiliar face, but was quick to investigate when she saw the hay I held out to her. Once she had tasted the hay and decided it was good, she let me pet her nose. I opened the stall to gather her saddle and bridle, softly introducing myself. She nickered but held still while I saddled her.

Torvald trotted over on Inger, smiling. "A fine choice."

"What's her name?" I asked once I had mounted my horse.

"The stable hands call her Malie," he replied. "It means serene."

I patted the side of Malie's neck. "You're properly named, my friend. Shall we go for a gallop?"

* * *

The king and his horse thundered down the hill as if we were racing. Malie and I struggled to keep up. Torvald waved at the guards stationed at both gatehouses, who let us through without a problem. Then we galloped around the base of the hill and toward the eastern side of the island. This was the richer side of Holger, with buildings closely resembling those on the royal hill. The dresses the women wore were even finer than the ones in Thora's shop had been. No one walked; the traffic was awful. The king and I barreled down the empty sidewalks while carriages inched along the streets. Several people called out to and waved at us, but the king paid them no mind.

We continued riding east until we came to the beach. It happened quite abruptly. One moment, glass, jade, and stone edifices were flying by us on either side, then we leapt over a waist-high wall and landed in sand. At last, the king slowed his horse's pace. In the middle of the day in the middle of the week, there wasn't a person in sight. I prepared to stop Malie, but Torvald spurred his horse onward to the south. We rode in the sand with the waves lapping against the shore beside us until a rocky wall intercepted us. The king slowed his horse down to a trot as we neared a narrow crevasse in the rock and carefully guided Inger through. Malie was hesitant to enter the dark, confined space but after a few reassuring words, she proceeded. When we stepped out into the sun again, we were in a cove. Tropical plants grew along the cliffs.

Torvald dismounted and walked his horse to a stretch of grass that grew near the cliff's base. I climbed down from Malie and did the same. The king removed his shoes and stockings, then rolled up the bottoms of his trousers. I pretended to admire the view to give him privacy, but he didn't seem to care. The cravat came off next, then the waistcoat. He tucked the crown between his folded clothes and rolled up his sleeves. He ran a hand through his hair, took a deep breath, and finally relaxed.

"Raoul and I discovered this place when we were children," he said. "Bodil and Dagmar took us to the beach as a treat for good behavior. The stretch of beach on the other side of the cliff was sectioned off so that the city kids wouldn't bother us." He rolled his eyes. "Dagmar has always been protective of us. Anyway, we played in the sand together and attempted to climb the cliff. Raoul found out that crevasse wasn't a shadow, as we had originally thought, and was

brave enough to venture in. I followed to make sure he didn't hurt himself."

Almost as a side note, he added, "It was always my fault if he hurt himself. He discovered this place so he named it. Pirate's Cove." He laughed. "In reality, this place is referred to as Valda Cove, but in my mind it has never been so. Bodil and Dagmar came looking for us and scolded us for disappearing. But they didn't make us leave. In fact, they brought us back here numerous times after that day. Many an adventure was had in this sand." He grew somber. "As we grew, there was less and less time for trips to the sea. I haven't been here in a long time."

"Dagmar raised you then?" I asked.

The king nodded. "After my mother passed away, my father assigned the mistress in charge of the royal midwives to be my governess of sorts. Even now that I've grown up, Dagmar insists on caring for me. I suppose that's why I asked her to be your handmaiden. I couldn't think of anyone else who could do a better job looking after my new Defender."

"Thank you," I said. "I'm honored."

The king shrugged and put his hands in his pockets.

I sat to unlace my boots, then tossed them and my stockings aside before getting to my feet again. Then I hefted up my skirts and padded over to the sea to let the waves wet my feet. The water was cold but refreshing. I longed for a swim.

Looking out across the waters, I envisioned a small schooner with Kustaav at the helm and my family hurrying across the deck to help him get it out to sea. My quiet, reserved fiancé had offered to take us out on the eve of my twentieth birthday. It seemed like ages ago.

"Have you ever sailed, my lord?" I asked before I could be overcome with emotion.

The king came to stand beside me. "Only once, before my father passed. I hardly remember the experience and I haven't gone out since. Dagmar is convinced I'll sail into a storm and be lost at sea."

"That's a shame. Everyone should sail at least once in their adult lives." I tucked some stray hairs behind my ear, only to have the breeze blow them free again. "But that can be said about a lot of things. Things you have probably already done."

Torvald laughed, but there was a bitter edge to it. "You would be surprised at the things I haven't been allowed to do."

I gave him a sideways glance. "Do your counselors govern every detail of your life?"

He squinted against the sun, the breeze tugging at his collar and ruffling his hair. "It isn't so much the counselors as it is our culture. Rules and traditions set by my forefathers demand certain things of

me." He shrugged. "Or so everyone keeps telling me. Even if I wanted to be unconventional, it would take a completely different attitude, a different generation in fact, to support me and my new endeavors."

I sighed. "Sire, I know what the counselors have asked you to do concerning me and our unique situation."

"It's ridiculous," he muttered. "I won't go through with it."

I raised my eyebrows at him and waited.

After a time, he finally met my gaze. "After speaking against tradition and claiming a desire to be unconventional, you might think me a hypocrite for saying this but I must be honest. I didn't want you to be my Defender. When I first heard of your skill, I was impressed but I knew I would never forgive myself if an arrow or a knife meant for me ended up hurting a woman. It was General Halvar and Director Endre who encouraged me to be objective. Both were convinced you were the better choice out of all the other candidates. Then I watched you fight and I saw for myself that you truly were the best choice. And your compassion for your friend spoke volumes about your character."

The king looked away, embarrassed. "I've been told not all arranged marriages are terrible. With enough communication and a willingness to please one's partner, two people can grow to love each other. Doing what my counselors want and marrying you wouldn't be a burden. It would be forming an intimate relationship with my Defender that would be the problem. If anything happened to you…"

I put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed like I had earlier that day. "You're worth following and defending. Whatever you decide to do concerning us, I will support you."

That smile he gave in response stretched across his face and lit his eyes. "Thank you, Lady Isa. It means so much to hear you say that."

"You're welcome, my lord."

We both turned back to the horizon.

"Sire," I said carefully, "I don't mean to pry, but have you considered Kalea?"

"Considered her how?"

I made a strange sound, something between a laugh and a scoff. "Surely you would prefer marrying a friend over a complete stranger. If it's an heir your counselors want from you, wouldn't it be more comfortable and convenient for you to have Kalea carry your child?"

The king furrowed his brow. "Me marry Kalea?"

"Why not? She's beautiful and smart. You obviously care about her, and as the daughter of your most trusted advisor, doesn't that give her some measure of status? I doubt your counselors would disapprove."

Torvald considered this for a moment before shrugging. "I've never thought about her that way to be honest."

“Perhaps it’s time you started,” I said.

“Perhaps…” The king stared out at the open ocean. “I respect Dagmar, but I’m a grown man. One day soon I’ll go sailing.”

I knotted my skirt around my knees so that I wouldn’t have to keep holding it. The documentation plaque slid out from the collar of my blouse and swung before my face. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“I’d be interested to learn more about this list of things a person must do at least once in their life,” Torvald said. “Perhaps my people won’t think me too strange or foolish if I were entertaining my Lady Warrior.”

I laughed, standing upright once again. “It isn’t a list well known by all. My sister and I made it up two summers ago.”

“Was she older than you, your sister?” Torvald asked softly.

I watched the sea foam cover my toes. “Yes. She was the beauty of the family with my grandmother’s red hair and green eyes. All the girls in our town envied her.” I gave myself a little shake and met his eyes. “It was she who started us thinking about the list. She had gone with an aunt of ours to a fashion show in a neighboring country and had loved the experience of meeting people she hadn’t known since she was small. She announced that I should travel out of the country at least once before my life was through. I in turn said she had to hike up a mountain at least once in her life and so on and so forth.”

“I must admit I have never hiked up a mountain before,” the king said.

“Well, after I’ve taken you sailing, we’ll go hiking. Slowly but surely, we’ll accomplish everything on the list.”

“For your sister,” he said.

I swallowed hard. “For Sylvi, yes, but for you also. You’re the king. You shouldn’t be so restrained.”

He chuckled and began walking back to the horses. “You sound like my father.”

I followed him. “Oh?”

“He was the only ruler in my family who openly and regularly disagreed with his counselors. He didn’t care what the people thought. He just did what he thought was right and sensible in his own eyes. I’ve heard contradicting opinions about his method of ruling, but our people never starved and those living on the hill were happy.” Torvald bent down to gather some fallen fronds from a palm tree and arrange them over the sand. “I suppose that means he did well.”

We sat on the fronds and watched the repetitive motion of the sea.

Suddenly self-conscious, I tucked my exposed legs under me. “Do you remember much about him?”

The king shook his head. “I was so young when he passed. And

when he was alive, I hardly saw him. He traveled a lot and kept himself busy when he was home. Dagmar said it was because he missed my mother. He could no longer sit still and spend time with his son as he used to. The few memories I do have of him include sitting beside him during meetings with the counselors, or when I stood beside him while the people gave their petitions, or when I dined with him during the island's anniversary celebration. Always when there was a lesson to be learned and a multitude of people."

He leaned back on the palms of his hands. "My grandmother only ever speaks well of him, but I can hardly expect her to be honest about her son's shortcomings, can I? She insists he cared for me right up until the end. Rakim says my father was too ambitious and arrogant for his own good. Dagmar once said he was a good man up until my mother passed. Grief turned him into something harsh and sinister. My grandfather refuses to speak ill of him, but he doesn't praise him either."

"You're close to your grandfather?" I asked because I had never met mine.

Torvald nodded. "My mother's father, Makoa. He, Rakim, and Dagmar taught me everything I know. I suppose you could say the three of them are my parents. Speaking of Grandfather, we should probably go back. He and I have lunch together twice a week. He'll scold me if I'm late." The king smiled at me. "I'm sure he'll be happy to meet you."

"I know you have much on your mind, sire," I said. "If you would like to speak to your grandfather in private about all that has happened today, I can patrol the outside of the building while you eat. I won't be able to unintentionally eavesdrop from that distance."

Torvald rose and held out his hand to assist me. "Thank you, but we're partners now, you and I. I don't want there to be secrets between us."

Once standing, I opened my mouth to object and paused. Over the king's shoulder and along the plateau-like top of the cliff, something glittered in the sunlight. Then I heard the unmistakable sound of an arrow slicing through the air.

"Look out!" I shoved the king aside and was struck in the chest.

Torvald shouted as I fell. "Isa!"

I hit the sand and rolled onto my side, biting my tongue to keep from crying. Pain traveled across my collarbone and shoulder, making it hard to breathe. I crawled behind the palm trees, whimpering when a new wave of pain came with every movement.

The king's face was wild with fear. He came to my aid, skittering across the sand on all fours. "We have to get you to a doctor immediately!"

A second arrow grazed his shoulder and embedded itself into the earth.

"Make for the rocks," I gasped. "To the crevasse!"

He ducked in time to avoid an arrow that was meant for his head. "But you're hurt!"

"Get yourself to safety, sire," I said through my teeth. "Now!"

Torvald cursed, but leapt to his feet and sprinted to the crevasse in the rock. I flinched as I watched his progress but, before I could advise him to duck, he began to swerve and spin.

I nodded. *Good man.*

I rolled onto my back and gripped the shaft of the arrow protruding from my chest. Despite the pressure weighing over my lungs like a rock, I forced myself to take three quick breaths. Then I yanked the arrow out. My scream made the king falter. He made it to the safety of the rocks and whirled around, anxious to see if I'd been shot again. I pressed the palm of my hand against my gushing wound and turned over onto my stomach. Several more arrows hit the palm trees with enough force to make them shake. Then the assault was over.

I blinked hard to clear my head and vision. Our attacker knew the king was still alive. The archer could be coming down the cliff to finish the job or he could be well on his way to retreating. I squinted up at the cliff from the base of the trees. The object glittering in the sun was moving across the flat crest of rock. Retreat it was then. I pushed myself up and sprinted to the horses.

I leapt onto Malie's back and kicked off the saddle, launching myself into the air. My outstretched foot landed on an unsteady rock on the cliff's side, but I pushed myself off of it and landed on another higher up. I continued leaping from rock to rock, often missing and scraping my shins. My documentation plaque bounced against my chest with each jump. But I made progress up the almost-vertical cliff side and eventually landed on the crest. The strange, inexplicable energy that coursed through my body kept me from collapsing despite the blood soaking the front of my blouse. I snatched the long blade from my thigh strap and ran after the archer.

I must have been breathing like a bull because the archer heard my approach. He spun around, notched an arrow, and let it fly. The metal head of the arrow blinked at me as it came. I swung my blade, intercepting the arrow before it could pierce my forehead and cleaving it in two. I swung and diverted three more arrows before I threw my blade. It sank between the archer's eyes. The power behind the throw tossed him back a few feet before he hit the earth. Now that my mission was accomplished, my vision faded and I joined the stranger on the ground.

Chapter Nineteen

I woke to the sound of grumbling.

"Curse him!"

"She'll live, Viggo," Bryn said. "And she managed to kill her assailant. Rejoice in that."

"Hang the archer," Viggo hissed. "I curse Dotharr! What kind of a god chooses a *woman* to be a human shield? I disown him. I disown them all!"

"Keep your voice down," Bryn said. "You'll wake her."

I peeled my eyes open to see that I was in my room. Bryn sat in one of the plush chairs by the tea table, dressed in the same medical student's garb I had seen him in yesterday. Viggo was dressed like a gentleman with a navy blue vest, white shirt, black trousers, and riding boots. His hair was combed. Hands clasped behind his back, face twisted in a scowl, copper eyes burning with fierce anger but worry as well… He was handsome. Of course, he always had been, but this was a different kind of handsome. He cast a shadow across the wall as he paced from one side of my room to the other. Dagmar sat on the stool by my vanity table, watching the men with squinting eyes and a thin frown.

"What are you two doing here?" I rasped, making them all jump.

Bryn and Viggo hurried to my side.

"They wouldn't let Bryn look at you," Viggo snapped as if it were somehow my fault. "The king dragged you through the lower ward, screaming for the doctor, and I was suddenly thankful I had asked Bryn to come with me to this damned job interview you recommended me for, but then the 'real' doctor came and pushed us aside because how could Bryn possibly have experience dealing with Dotharr's anointed?" He let out a choked sound of outrage. "He *is* one of Dotharr's anointed!"

Bryn gripped my hand. "How are you feeling, Asta?" he asked before Viggo could continue his rant.

"Better now that my friends are here." I turned to Dagmar. "Thank you for letting them stay with me."

Dagmar *hmmphed*. "They said they were your brothers."

I laughed, which sent pain across my chest and shoulder. I noticed my right arm was in a sling. "They're as good as. What's the verdict?"

"Dotharr was watching over you," Dagmar said, causing both men to frown. "The arrow pierced nothing vital."

"If the arrow had struck any lower, you would have been in mortal danger," Bryn said. "Instead it only separated your shoulder

from your collarbone. If you spend the rest of today and tomorrow in bed, you should be healed by the day after."

I sat up. "I'll mend better at the king's side. Where is he?"

"He's having lunch with his grandfather in the jade building," Viggo said. "His other Defenders and half of the guards in his employment are marching around the upper ward. He'll survive without you for a day."

I relaxed back into my pillows. "So he's all right."

"The master is worried about you, and upset about the attack, but he is physically well, yes," Dagmar said, rising to tuck the comforter around me. "You need not stress over him. Just focus on resting. Can I get you anything?"

My stomach snarled. "Some lunch would be great. Could you arrange for two courses to be brought here for me and my brothers?"

Dagmar bowed her head, shot the men a harsh look, and proceeded to leave the room.

"Charming woman," Viggo muttered once the door had been shut behind her.

"What was this I heard about you disowning your precious Heavenly Masters?" I asked.

Viggo cleared his throat and tugged at his cravat. "I said nothing of the sort."

I pursed my lips to keep from smiling. I might not have been his 'responsibility' anymore but it seemed he still cared about me. It warmed my heart. "How was your interview? Dressed like that I'm sure you were hired on the spot."

Viggo put his hands in his pockets and frowned at the fire. "Yes, I was hired, but I think it had more to do with my acquaintance with you than my credentials."

Bryn elbowed his friend in the ribs. "Don't think on it any longer. You'll do well here. Master Philo will witness your skills in time and come to respect you for them, not only for your friendship with Asta."

"It's Lady Isa on the royal hill," Viggo said with a smirk in my direction. "Master Philo spoke very highly of you."

My face burned. "Oh?"

"He said you're the quickest learner and most dedicated warrior he has ever seen. Apparently, you killed a foreign assassin on your first day here."

I cringed back into my pillows, wishing I could sink into them and disappear. "The king was never in real danger. General Halvar sent that man to test my ability to kill. It was a sailor from his ship, *The Great Disaster*." I swallowed against the lump of shame in my throat.

Bryn's face softened. "I'm sorry, Asta."

“He was a good for nothing, no doubt,” Viggo said gruffly. “You did the world a favor.”

“Yes, he was, but it still felt wrong. It’s not what I thought, taking the life of another. It’s unnatural.” I wrapped my good arm around my queasy stomach. “No one is meant for it. I don’t understand why it exists.”

“Because ours is an imperfect world,” Bryn said, sitting beside me on the bed, “where evil runs rampant.”

Viggo walked around the bed to sit on my other side. “And because without death we would overpopulate the earth and have to live under the sea.”

I laughed, only to double over in pain.

Bryn reached over my bent shape to slap his friend’s shoulder. “You mustn’t say things like that! You’ll make her reopen her wound.”

“Laughter is the best medicine,” Viggo said, unapologetic.

“In all seriousness, Asta, Isa, Lady Warrior of the Royal Hill,” Bryn said, “You have aptly and courageously applied your training, and saved the king’s life twice within a twenty-four-hour span. I’m proud to call you my friend.”

I beamed at him despite the tears in my eyes. “Where would I be without you, Behnam?”

“Dead in a ditch somewhere, I’d wager,” Viggo said, earning a glare from Bryn.

“That’s not even remotely funny.”

“I had a death wish when I first came to Dotharr’s Academy,” I explained when Viggo gave his friend a puzzled look. “Bryn is a firm believer in the sanctity of life and scolded me for even considering—”

“As well he should!” Viggo sputtered. “I understand you must have been devastated by the death of your family, but to consider joining them before your time is… is…”

“Blasphemous?” I guessed.

“Well, yes. Among other things.”

I rolled my eyes, but my smile remained. I looped an arm through his and leaned my head on Bryn’s shoulder, perfectly content despite my injury.

Dagmar returned with three servants, who carried platters of food and drink. She almost dropped her plate of desserts when she saw the three of us so comfortable together on my bed.

“They’re my brothers, remember?” I said.

“Yes, and horses can fly!” Dagmar said. “Have some decorum or I will remove your men from the premises. What would the master say if he walked in on this spectacle?”

My friends stood and apologized.

“This is my room, Dagmar, and these are my guests,” I said loudly

so as to be heard over them. “I’m sure the king would allow me to behave in whatever manner I choose within my own walls.”

Dagmar set the plates down on the tea table with a clatter. “This is the master’s house, Lady Isa, and you are *his* guest. I’m sure he would want your respect within his walls.” She left before I could formulate a reply, the servants trailing behind her.

“It’s good to know you’re in no danger of becoming a savage here,” Bryn teased.

I carefully climbed out of bed, glad I had been changed out of my bloody blouse and sandy skirt. I wore a nightshirt and dark tights now, which revealed nothing my friends hadn’t already seen. Bryn took my arm and helped me walk over to one of the plush chairs. “Yes, my handmaiden is determined to keep me a lady. I think she believes the king would be deeply insulted if I wore trousers in his presence.” I settled into the chair with a grimace.

“How are you supposed to run and sneak in a dress?” Viggo asked, coming to join us.

I pointed at him with a baguette. “My thoughts exactly.” He gripped the other end of the bread and helped me tear it into smaller pieces. I kept one piece for myself while he divided the others between Bryn and himself. “I came up with some alterations for my seamstress to apply to my new dresses that will hopefully make them easier to dismantle in a hurry. I’ll simply wear tights underneath so that I can sprint without hindrance or fear of giving Dagmar a heart attack.”

Bryn chuckled, piling meat and vegetables onto his plate. “You continue to astound me.”

“I won’t let my clothing get in the way of protecting my charge,” I said, dipping my bread into a bowl of soup.

“Speaking of which, what’s the king like?” Viggo asked with his mouth full of bread. “The last time we spoke you weren’t so convinced his character was pure.”

“So far he has proven to be everything you said he was.” I lowered my voice because Dagmar hadn’t bothered to close the door when she’d made her dramatic exit. “He isn’t behind General Halvar’s actions overseas. The general has provided all the right documents and has fake ambassadors working with him to legitimize his claims. Torvald is looking into both the documents and the real identities of these emissaries. Hopefully, we’ll find substantial proof of Halvar’s crimes soon.”

“Or enough to make a case against him,” Bryn said with a nod. “This is great news, Asta. You’ll let us know if there’s anything we can do?”

“Of course.” I could hear the maids doing their routine walk-

through, starting with my washroom next door. I cleared my throat and changed the subject. “Torvald struggles with the idea of a woman taking arrows for him. I think he would like one of his Defenders to protect *me* while I’m protecting *him*.”

Viggo nodded in approval. “He sounds like a smart man.”

I smirked at him. “Would it be smart to have a guard protect my guard while he is protecting me while I am protecting the king? Torvald would have a group of men following him and me wherever we went. That’s not very inconspicuous, or practical. You’re allowing one injury to make you paranoid.”

“I am *not* paranoid,” Viggo said, picking at his vegetables.

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with me being the King’s Defender back at the academy,” I pointed out.

“Actually, he did,” Bryn said. “I believe he stood up in front of all our peers and accused General Halvar of blasphemy.”

“Yes, well, I’ve learned a few things since then, haven’t I?” Viggo said with a roll of his eyes.

Bryn sipped his drink and grinned over his goblet. “I should hope so.

Viggo frowned at his friend before turning to me. “It isn’t that I doubt your skill, Asta. You’re obviously talented and capable. It’s just… It’s unnatural for men to stand idle while a woman faces danger.”

Compliments from him were few and far between. I never knew how to react when I heard them. I tried not to allow myself to become flustered by his words and simply reached over to squeeze his arm. “Thank you for your concern, but I’m where I need to be. In the future, I’ll strive to be more attentive to prevent causing myself bodily harm. Please, don’t worry about me.”

“I don’t worry,” Viggo murmured, shrugging out of my touch and lowering his gaze.

“You worry more than my grandmother,” Bryn said, trying and failing to keep a straight face.

Viggo scowled at him but continued to eat.

“So,” I said. “What’ll your duties be as the assistant to the guard master?”

“I’ll be in charge of running drills, leading patrols, assigning schedules, and giving and cataloging reports,” Viggo said grumpily.

I reached for more meat. “That doesn’t leave much for Master Philo’s other assistant to do.”

“The other assistant will be in charge of writing the records, hiring and dismissing guards, handling quarrels, and purchasing the guards’ living supplies. Master Philo seems to have come to the realization that he has more physical restrictions as he gets older. He

hopes to move into more of an overseer's position now that he has two assistants, and spend more time sitting than standing."

"He picked the right man for the job. No one stands better than you," Bryn said, clapping his friend on the back.

Viggo couldn't help but smile at that.

"Are you finished with classes for the day?" I asked Bryn.

"I have two more classes this afternoon, but I left early claiming a stomachache. Despite the air of confidence our Viggo so loves to portray, he was nervous about the interview and I was glad to accompany him."

Viggo snorted. "You just wanted to see the royal hill."

Bryn nibbled on a chunk of meat. "That too."

"Will you return to visit us after Viggo has settled in?" I asked.

"Try and stop me."

* * *

My friends left after lunch. Viggo would be returning the next day to move into the guards' quarters and start working. Bryn promised to stop by later in the week. Dagmar forced me to take more medication and ordered me to sleep. When I woke later that evening, I felt more rested than I had in weeks. Although I'd developed a reputation for destroying clothes, Dagmar helped me into another evening gown and escorted me downstairs for dinner.

A gentleman at least twice my age waited for me in the foyer. He appeared strong despite his thinning hair. I remembered him as one of the guards who had attended my graduation. He hurried over to help me down the last few steps.

"Thank you," I said. "Am I correct to assume you're Hemming?"

"At your service, my lady," he said with a bow. "I was told to stand by in case you had any questions concerning your position but, from the looks of things, I'd say you understand perfectly what your duties are." He smiled kindly. "An assassin is dead and the king is unharmed. Well done."

"I only did what any of you would have done," I said, taken aback by his praise.

"My thoughts exactly! I'm glad to have you on our team."

I was happy to hear at least one of the Defenders was.

Helka, Bodil, Raoul, Haskell, and Evie joined the king at the table again, asking endless questions about the night before and our adventure on the beach. I explained about the previous night but the king handled the tale about the beach with as little graphic detail as possible. He seemed recovered from his scare. I caught his eye often

and he smiled every time.

"I'm glad to see you're on the mend," he said.

I believed him.

I inquired about lunch with his grandfather, to which the king replied, "It went well. He was alarmed to hear about the attack, but impressed with your response. He's very much looking forward to meeting you. He praised your insights about my future."

Helka and Bodil did a better job at pretending not to be curious, but the children openly and expectantly watched the interaction, hoping for an explanation.

"So you have made your decision?" I said, stomach squirming with nerves.

Torvald smiled somewhat wearily. "Not quite, but I'm considering my options."

I let the matter drop before the children could outright ask us what in the world we were talking about. The king drilled Haskell about his day until dinner was through. After his family had retired for the night, Torvald and I trekked up the stairs. I checked all of his rooms twice for intruders before I allowed him to go to bed. Then I bid him goodnight and went to change into my sneaking clothes before heading outside. I walked the perimeter of his home, making sure the correct amount of guards had reported for duty. Then I alerted Hemming that I was leaving and joined the patrol along the wall.

Chapter Twenty

I was dragging my feet up the steps to the king's home an hour or so before sunrise when Master Philo called my name. I turned to see the aging guard master coming to a stop by the rose bushes. His face was flushed and his uniform disheveled, as if he had dressed in a hurry.

"Lady Isa," he wheezed. "I know you are likely on your way to bed, but this cannot wait."

"What happened?" I asked.

"It is Counselor Odalis, ma'am," Master Philo said. "He has been murdered."

"What? Where? How?" I sputtered. "Show me!"

He hurried across the upper ward and toward the jade building with me hard on his heels. He leaned against the doorframe for a moment to catch his breath.

"I can continue alone. Just tell me where his living quarters are," I said.

"Third floor… Eighth door on… the left," Master Philo gasped. "Right behind you, my lady."

I raced up the stairs and then remembered it was still dark outside. Normal people were asleep at this hour so I tried to be quieter. Rounding the corner of the third floor, I padded across the carpeted hallway that divided the rooms. I straightened out of my crouch when I spotted a guard by the eighth door on the left side.

"Were there any witnesses?" I whispered when I was close enough. "Do we know anything?"

"The doctor is in there right now, determining the time of death, Lady Warrior," the guard reported. "Odalis's wife, son, and two daughters are accounted for. The youngest daughter discovered the body. She woke her mother, who called Master Philo. The family seems to know nothing."

I nodded in thanks, braced myself for what I might see, and entered. The family was gathered in the lavish sitting room. The wife blubbered to a guard, who was taking notes. The girls, who appeared to be Haskell and Raoul's age, cried into the shoulders of their older brother. He patted their backs and stared blankly at the wall. No one seemed to notice me. I continued down the short hall and into the lit kitchen. Counselor Odalis lay face down on the expensive tile floor with a knife in his back. I recognized him from the meeting. He was a short, round fellow with graying hair.

Lennart and another man I could only assume was the fifth and final Defender stood nearby, murmuring amongst themselves. He had

a short mustache and red-brown hair. I remembered him as being the second guard accompanying the king at my graduation ceremony.

The doctor knelt by the body but stood when I walked in. “Lady Isa, you should be resting.”

I angled my body away from him to hide the arm that was still in a sling. “I’m well enough to stand, so I’m well enough to work.”

“Your shoulder will not heal if you are not resting,” he said with a frown.

Instead of letting indignation win, I fought a smile. “Have you met my handmaiden, Dagmar? You two would be great friends, I think.”

Dr. Ichiro’s enlarged eyes blinked behind his spectacles. The frown remained. He looked like a small, angry owl with his stooped back and tuft of gray hair.

“While I appreciate your opinion, Doctor, I’m ultimately in charge of my own person,” I said. “You have treated many of Dotharr’s anointed so I don’t need to remind you that we heal quicker than the average soldier. I’ll be all right in a few hours’ time. If I’m not, I give you permission to scold me for my foolishness. Now, can you tell me what happened here?”

Lennart nodded at me, and the fifth Defender—I scrambled for his name and finally remembered it was Finley—turned. “Lady Isa,” he said. “You aren’t on duty today. What are you doing here?”

“I was summoned by Master Philo,” I said. “I thought we all were.”

“This doesn’t concern you. You should return to the king’s home.”

“With all due respect, you’re not my master. What I do in my free time is my business. Now, can someone please tell me what happened here?” I gestured to the dead counselor on the floor.

Dr. Ichiro clasped his hands behind his back. “From the little girl’s report, all was quiet. She woke up in the night, in desperate need of a glass of water. When she walked into the kitchen, she found her father on the floor.”

Finley shot him a harsh look, which the doctor ignored.

“He was on his side then. She ran to wake her mother, who came, saw him, and thought he had fainted. Her husband didn’t wake so she rolled over the body. When she discovered the dagger, she sent for Master Philo.”

I glanced about the kitchen as he spoke, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. If the counselor had attempted to fight his attacker, surely something would have been disturbed and some noise would have been made.

The doctor knelt by the body once again, gripped the knife’s handle, and carefully took it out of the counselor’s back. “When the

wife was questioned, she said her husband had acted perfectly normal today. They went to bed at nine o'clock and she didn't stir until her daughter woke her. It appears the counselor was awoken during the night and lured to the kitchen by either a strange sound or the need for a midnight snack." Dr. Ichiro brought the dagger closer to his face. I could see the reflection of the bloody blade in his spectacles. He pursed his lips. "If I'm not mistaken, this is a palace weapon."

I went to his side. "How can you tell?"

"Our smithy, Mistress Pembe, engraves her personal signature on every weapon she crafts."

"Was that not included in your scrolls?" Lennart asked innocently.

"This is the respect and professionalism you were talking about earlier?" I retorted.

"See the slender letter 'P' at the blade's end, just above the handle?" The doctor held the dagger out for me to see.

I leaned forward. "Does this mean one of our own guards killed the counselor?"

"Or this was left behind to make us believe so," Finley said.

"So we must assume no one on the royal hill is safe," I said. "What's going to be done about this?"

"That is Master Philo's responsibility," Finley said. "Now get some sleep, Lady Isa."

I almost snapped at him, but paused. Despite his tone of finality, he didn't seem angry with me. By the set of his brow and the look in his copper eyes, I could almost believe he was concerned for me. So I left without further complaint.

King Torvald dropped the jam knife onto his plate with a clatter. "Counselor Odalis is dead?"

Finley nodded, cutting his ham into bite-sized pieces. "Yes, my lord. I'm sorry. I don't know how this happened, but rest assured Master Philo is conducting a full investigation and we Defenders are at his disposal."

The king stared down at his plate in shock. "I just spoke to him yesterday… I snapped at him for pointing out the old-fashioned tendencies of our culture. Lisodinae have mercy on his soul." He tapped his forehead and his lips with his pointer finger then remained still, eyes downcast.

"Sire," I said tentatively, "his family and neighbors were interrogated earlier this morning and none reported any unusual characters lingering by the jade building. The knife used to kill the counselor was made by the palace smithy."

His eyes met mine, wide in disbelief. "One of our own men did this?"

“Master Philo is exploring every possible explanation,” Finley said with a look of disapproval in my direction. “We will discover the truth. I promise.”

The king nodded absently.

“Master Philo has requested extra guards to patrol the upper ward,” Finley continued, “and Lady Isa has agreed not to leave this house at night until the perpetrator is caught.”

Torvald managed a smile. “Your dedication is appreciated.” Then he seemed to notice that my arm was no longer in its sling. “Have you healed already?”

I ran my fingers over my still-tender shoulder. “Not completely, but I can move my arm without hurting myself and that is reason enough for me to abandon the sling.”

“I’m sure Dagmar was pleased to hear it,” the king said with a chuckle.

“She was ready to wring my neck this morning,” I recalled. “But I can’t let her scare me into being too cautious.”

Torvald retrieved the jam knife and resumed lathering his piece of toast with strawberry preserves. “I can’t help but marvel at the randomness of this attack. Counselor Odalis is important because he is one of my advisers but… I can’t imagine he’s well known anywhere but on the hill.”

Finley took a swig of juice. “He must have been involved in something important or he wouldn’t have been murdered. What were his assignments?”

“I’m ashamed to say I’m not entirely sure,” Torvald said with a grimace. “Rakim delegates the counselors’ duties.”

“No matter. I’ll simply remind Master Philo to speak with the other counselors while conducting his investigation,” Finley said.

The king shrugged as if to rid himself of any remaining unease. “I heard you had visitors yesterday, Lady Isa.”

“Yes, Brynjar, son of Endre, and Viggo, son of Padraig. I recommended Viggo for the position as the guard master’s assistant. He came to interview with Master Philo and brought Bryn for support. They were on the royal grounds when we returned from the beach.”

Torvald nodded. “Ah, yes. I remember.”

“They stayed to be sure I was all right.”

“I think I remember Dagmar saying that one of them was enrolled in Ishem’s School of Science,” the king said. “But both men had copper eyes.”

I smiled down at my oatmeal. “That would be Bryn. He has the same abilities as Viggo and I, and yet his mind works differently. He is excelling in medical school.”

“I suppose it was silly of me, but I thought everyone with glowing

eyes had to be a warrior," the king admitted somewhat sheepishly.

"You are not alone in your belief, sire," Finley said. "Lady Isa's friend is the only copper-eyed fellow I've met who isn't a warrior."

"Bryn is exceptional," I couldn't help but brag. "He's working on a theory that will disprove the belief that everyone with glowing eyes is destined to become a warrior."

Finley ran a hand through his red-brown curls, unimpressed. "I wish him luck. Disproving a belief that has been alive for centuries is no simple task."

"If anyone can do it, Bryn can," I said with confidence.

"I would like to meet him someday," the king said.

I smiled. "He would be honored, sir. Now that two of his closest friends are working here, he would like to visit us often. With your permission, I would like to arrange for a documentation plaque to be made for him so that he can walk freely on the royal hill."

"If you trust him, Lady Isa, he's welcome," the king replied.

"Thank you," I said with a bow of my head.

We ate our breakfast in silence for a moment before Torvald spoke again. "I think I'll visit Odalis's family tomorrow, and offer assistance in making funeral preparations."

"I'm sure they would appreciate that, my lord." Finley wiped his mouth with his napkin and rose. "Thank you for breakfast. If you'll excuse me, I must begin patrolling the perimeter." He glanced at me as he left. "Alert me of anything suspicious." He was gone before I could reply.

I bristled. "Is he always so—?"

"Authoritative and distant?" Torvald asked. "Yes, but I suppose that's why the other Defenders look to him for leadership despite his age. Even Hemming obeys him and Hemming has been my Defender the longest." He picked at his eggs, suddenly uncomfortable. "I've made my decision concerning us."

I sat up, curious and anxious all at once. "What have you decided, my lord?"

He said the words carefully as if testing them. "I'm going to court Kalea."

I wasn't sure how to react. I was relieved to not have to marry him, and pleased that he'd taken my advice, but would it hurt his feelings if I was overjoyed by this news? Opting for a neutral expression, I said, "That sounds wise, sire."

"If you weren't my Defender and you didn't have to bear me a child, I would ask you to marry me," he said, almost as if to justify himself. "It would be an honor to call you my wife, Lady Isa, truly. But I can't put you in that position. You have given so much already; I can't ask for anything more."

"You're a good man, my lord, and I think you've made the right choice. Honestly. I'm not the least bit offended."

He exhaled and smiled. "Your advice was sound. Kalea has been my friend since childhood. It's a good match. She'll make a fine queen and mother. Thank you for opening my eyes to the possibilities."

"You're very welcome."

I spent the day marching around the king's house, stopping by his office occasionally to check in on him and Counselor Rakim as they pored over charters and ledgers. Mostly, I frequented the windows and doors, checked the locks, surveyed the rooftops of the buildings across the ward, watched Finley mingle with the guards, and made sure there weren't any random servants milling about in the yards both front and back. I watched the servants inside scurrying to and fro, cleaning, cooking, running errands, and bringing drinks for the king and his most trusted adviser. All in all, it was a very boring day.

The butler came to find me at sunset. "Lady Isa? A caravan from Thora's Fabric and Dress has arrived for you."

I eagerly followed the butler out of the drawing room where I had been resting my feet. I was tired of wearing other women's dresses and skirts, none of which fit perfectly and all of which were too fine for my line of work. Many servants walked the hallway, carrying parcels to my room. I had forgotten just how many dresses and skirts I had ordered. One of the ladies from Thora's shop found me among the masses, curtsied, and handed me a letter from Thora herself. Thanking her, I tore it open.

"My lady," Dagmar said pointedly from the top of the staircase. I looked up to see her frowning at me, arms crossed. "Just where exactly are we supposed to keep all these parcels?"

"If you have nothing better to do, could you perhaps open them and put my new clothes away?" I asked.

Dagmar glared down her nose at me. "That is a job for the maids!"

I winced at my own mistake and smiled apologetically. "Then perhaps you could rustle up some maids who are willing to put my new clothes away?"

Dagmar *hmmphed* and marched down the hall.

"She's in a mood today," the butler murmured.

"She's upset because I'm out of my sling before the doctor gave me permission to be," I said, returning to my letter. "We owe Thora quite a bit more money. Could you arrange for this amount to be sent back with the caravan?" I handed him the folded piece of parchment.

"Of course, my lady." He took it and went to do as he was told.

I stopped one of the servants and asked to take a peek at

whatever lay in his parcel. He handed me the box without a second thought and retreated to unload more. After hurrying back into the drawing room, I fell into the sofa with my package. I snapped the strings and lifted the top to reveal a dress made out of purple fabric with little white flowers.

It came in two pieces, as I had requested. The bodice had a sweetheart neckline and modest puff sleeves. A white satin bow sat just below the bust. A very thin wire had been added down the sides of the bodice to outline my form, but it would not be nearly as confining as a corset. The skirts were meant to wrap around my waist and tie, allowing me to be rid of them with a simple tug. A thinner, lighter petticoat was sown to the skirts to give them some fluff. The bodice would be just long enough to mask the presence of the ties around my waist; from a distance, it might even appear to be a one-piece dress.

It was perfect. If I loved Thora before, I absolutely adored her now. I fought my way through the line of servants filing up the stairs and hurried into the washroom to change. There was something truly wonderful about having a dress to call my own. The fabric that touched my skin was new and soft. It smelled heavenly. And it was mine! I pranced out of the washroom, smiling what was most likely a ridiculously large smile, and found Viggo at the foot of the stairs. He wore the black and purple uniform of the royal guard with two additional medals that represented his position. His documentation plaque hung from his neck.

He looked up at me and stepped back in surprise. “New dress?”

“Yes! One of my own design.” I folded the end of the bodice to show him the ties. “Isn’t it genius? Isn’t it beautiful?”

Viggo shrugged. “I suppose.”

I frowned. “You suppose?”

“Well, agreeing with you would hardly make me a man, would it?” he said with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes as I descended. “Amusing. What brings you here?”

He held up a sleeve with several documents in it. “The report on Counselor Odalis.”

“It’s finished already?” I snatched it from him and leafed through the pages.

Viggo snatched it back before I could read them. “These are just the accounts of Odalis’s neighbors and the guards stationed on the section of the wall that is closest to the jade building. They reveal nothing we don’t already know. Master Philo basically sent me here to tell the king we have nothing to report.”

I blew the hair out of my face, frustrated at my bangs and our

lack of progress. “It happened under my nose, Viggo. I have to know who was responsible.”

“How do you suppose Master Philo feels? How do you think I feel? It’s my first day on the job and, not only do I have a murder case on my hands, but I have to be the one to report that we have nothing to report.”

“Complaining already?”

Viggo plastered on a smile. “Thank you so much for recommending me for this position.”

I bumped shoulders with him and nodded up the stairs. “The king’s office is this way.”

“I wasn’t complaining,” Viggo clarified as we traveled to the second story. “I didn’t expect to have to deliver bad news so soon after starting this job, that’s all. This is my first time meeting the king of Holger. I had hoped to be the bearer of better news.”

“The king won’t blame you for the case’s lack of progress. But, honestly, no one saw *anything*? Not even the guards on the wall?”

He riffled through the pages in the sleeve. “One wall guard reported seeing an upper ward guard leaving his position during the time Dr… Icheero speculated the counselor was murdered.”

“Ichiro,” I corrected.

“Sorry. Ichiro.” When he found what he was looking for, he handed me the parchment. “I found that guard, Maceo, and questioned him. He said he wasn’t feeling well. He abandoned his post to find a private place to vomit.”

“According to this report, Maceo said he knelt between the craftsmen’s workspaces to empty his stomach,” I said, skimming over the file. “Did you check this spot?”

“I did. I found the dried and crusted remains of his dinner,” Viggo said, nose wrinkled in disgust. “It’s possible that someone knew where he would be positioned last night and purposefully tampered with his dinner so that he would be forced to abandon his post to empty his stomach.”

I lowered the parchment, trying to picture the spot this guard described in his report. “If I’m not mistaken, there are three other guards who patrol that area.”

Viggo nodded. “All of whom I interrogated to verify Maceo’s story. I was thorough.”

“I’m not questioning your abilities. I’m just trying to wrap my head around the situation,” I said, waving a hand to dismiss his agitation. “Maceo is the only guard who wasn’t at his post during the time of the murder?”

“The only one I can remember. You’d have to read the other reports to confirm it.”

“I trust your memory. What of the smithy? Have you questioned her?”

“Master Philo thought it unlikely that Mistress Pembe would use one of her own blades to murder someone but yes, I asked about her whereabouts last night. She said she and two of her apprentices were working in the smithy past one in the morning on a new order of swords for General Halvar. Both apprentices confirmed her story.”

“She didn’t report a missing dagger?” I asked, returning the parchment with Maceo’s story.

“I described the murder weapon, hoping she would remember who she’d made it for,” Viggo said, tucking the parchment back into the sleeve. “Unfortunately, she said it sounded like one of the standard daggers she makes for the royal guard.”

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. “Another dead end.”

“You’re tired,” he observed.

“Exhausted,” I murmured. “But it can’t be helped. Come. The king’s office is right over there.”

Viggo hesitated. “Asta…”

I sent him a harsh look over my shoulder. “If you volunteer to guard the king so that I can get a full night’s rest, I will strangle you.”

“Remind me never to do anything nice for you,” he said with a frown.

“I’m sorry,” I said, abandoning my anger in a heartbeat. “I appreciate the sentiment, but this is my job. If I’m to do my best, I have to learn all that I can as quickly as I can. I simply can’t be coddled.”

“You can’t be at your best if you don’t sleep.”

I stifled a poorly-timed yawn. “I’ll be all right once I know everything there is to know about life on this hill.”

“And once you’ve acclimated to your new schedule,” Finley said, coming up the stairs. “I imagine you never had to suffer two or three sleepless nights a week in the academy.”

Viggo straightened up as the Defender approached us.

Finley held out his hand. “Master Viggo, I presume.”

“Yes, and you are?”

“Finley,” I said before he could. “He’s another one of the king’s bodyguards.” I turned to him. “Does that make you a master or a lord?”

Finley released Viggo’s hand, eyes fixed on the ledger. “Neither. Is that the report on Counselor Odalis’s murder?”

“Just the accounts we’ve gathered so far,” Viggo said but he handed over the bundle of pages all the same. “Nothing suspicious or worth mentioning.”

“If you’re not a lord despite being a Defender, why am I a lady?” I

asked.

"You are referred to as Lady Isa because that is how the king introduced you," Finley said, eyes fixed on the report. "Not because you hold any special measure of status."

A choked cry from Torvald's office made the three of us bolt for the open door.

Chapter Twenty-One

When Finley, Viggo, and I burst into the office, Counselor Rakim knelt by the fallen king while a female servant cowered in the corner with a platter of drinks, which trembled in her unsteady hands.

"Your Majesty!" Counselor Rakim shouted, gripping Torvald's shoulder. "Can you hear me? Are you all right?"

The king foamed at the mouth, made horrible choking sounds, eyes wide in terror, body shaking.

I turned to the servant. "What happened?"

"I-I don't know! I only gave him the chilled wine he had r-requested," she said. "Once he took a drink… he c-collapsed."

"Call Dr. Ichiro," Finley said. "Now! Hurry!"

The servant abandoned her tray and dashed out of the room.

Finley hurried to the discarded goblet and brought it to his nose. His copper eyes widened.

"What is it?" I demanded, rushing to his side. "Poison?"

"Definitely, but what kind?" Finley murmured almost to himself. "I know this scent…"

Viggo sprinted out of the office, but I hardly noticed. I stared down at the king, gripping fistfuls of my hair, heart racing, mind reeling. Flying arrows and blows I could stop, but what good was I against a toxin?

Please, don't die! was all I could think as I watched the king's eyes roll back and then close. *Please, don't let him die!*

Viggo raced back into the room, chewing.

Rage burned away my fear. I released my hair. "Did you go get a *snack*?"

My friend stooped by the king, elbowing Counselor Rakim and Finley aside.

"Who are you?" the counselor demanded. "What are you doing here? Leave at once and get the doctor!"

Viggo spat what appeared to be chewed pieces of a celery stalk into his hand and then shoved them into Torvald's mouth. Before I could be sick all over the expensive rug, the king stopped trembling. He opened his eyes and began to cough. Viggo let out a sigh of relief and leaned back against the bookcase.

Finley shoved Counselor Rakim out of the way to grip the king's elbow. "Sire, are you well?"

Torvald took in a deep, rasping breath through his nose before continuing to cough. But at least he was breathing again. I didn't care if the Heavenly Masters truly existed; I praised them all at that moment.

“What was it you gave him?” the counselor asked, face pale.

“A cuote stalk. It’s a common vegetable that’s often used in poison antidotes.” Viggo grimaced. “I spend too much time with Bryn.”

I threw my arms around his shoulders. “We’re so very glad that you do!”

Dr. Ichiro came onto the scene a moment later, out of breath and with a satchel full of antidotes. Counselor Rakim, Finley, Viggo, and I made way for the doctor, who sat beside the king. He checked Torvald’s pulse, pupil dilation, hearing, and lastly his mouth. All the while, he asked Torvald random questions to test his lucidity. The king’s murmured answers must have been correct because the doctor nodded several times. A glass of water and a goblet of milk were brought up, both of which the king downed before rising. The doctor insisted on taking Torvald to the hospital to conduct more thorough tests and eventually won.

Before the king was dragged out of his office, he found Viggo’s face and managed a small nod of thanks.

“To Viggo!” Bryn said, raising his goblet and sending his friend a broad grin. “The man who, for all his complaining, actually listens from time to time.”

Viggo rolled his eyes when I gave a hearty, “Hear, hear!” and took a long gulp of his mead.

“Dr. Ichiro said it was genius, simply genius, to use the cuote stalk,” I said, relishing in Viggo’s embarrassment. “It fought the poison long enough for him to find the right antidote and completely obliterate the remains of the toxin. Perhaps there is another one of Dotharr’s anointed destined for Ishem’s School of Science.”

“All right, enough, you two,” Viggo said, grimacing. “I only did what anyone else would have done in my position. There’s no need to continue talking about it.”

Bryn and I shared a grin.

King Torvald was released from the hospital after a full twenty-four hours, but was ordered to stay in bed to regain his strength. He had Viggo summoned to his quarters so that he could personally thank the new assistant to the guard master for his quick thinking. A shiny medal was being prepared and Viggo’s heroic actions would be shared during the island’s anniversary celebration.

Because it had been Bryn that had given Viggo the knowledge necessary to save the king’s life, he had also been summoned to the king’s home. There Torvald announced that both his Poison Detector and Food Processor had been fired. They hadn’t noticed that the bottle of perfectly good wine they had ordered just last week had been

replaced by the bottle of poisoned wine. Bryn was to take up the positions immediately. The king was going to hire a professor from Ishem's to come to the royal hill and help Bryn finish his education while he worked on the grounds. And once Bryn had graduated, he was guaranteed an apprenticeship with Dr. Ichiro.

Finley questioned the servants, the cook, and the deliverymen, and only one admitted to seeing the icebox lid slightly ajar one day when it shouldn't have been. Finley still didn't have any suspects but was still investigating, and was confident that he'd discover the guilty party soon.

It had been too close of a call and the terror I had experienced was one that I never wanted to feel again. But the results of yesterday's events had turned out greater than anyone could have imagined.

Now the three of us lounged in a booth in the Thistle Pub, enjoying a bottle of the most expensive mead on the menu along with three slabs of fine meat, healthy servings of cheesy potatoes, and bushels of stewed vegetables.

I tipped my tankard to my friend. "Welcome to the hill, Behnam."

"Thank you. Isn't it marvelous?" Bryn said, merry with mead. "Asta has only been here for four days and already she has us working and living together! Just like we dreamed." He belched and slapped a hand over his mouth.

Viggo held in his laugh much better than I did. He hooked a finger around the handle of Bryn's tankard and pulled it out of his friend's reach. "I think you've had enough to drink."

"I don't think he's finished one," I said, leaning forward to peek. "Has he never had mead before?"

"Once," Viggo said, "when we turned eighteen. It wasn't pretty."

Bryn's jaw dropped. "You promised you'd never tell anyone that I puked on a girl's dress!"

I choked on my drink.

"I didn't tell, you fool!" Viggo nudged Bryn's plate forward. "Have some more to eat. It'll balance out the amount of drink you've consumed."

"It doesn't work that way," Bryn said, slumping back into his seat.

"It might."

Bryn sighed heavily, picked up his fork, and began stabbing his steak. I dabbed at my mouth with a napkin, still smiling.

"All right, enough laughing! How goes your case murder?" He glared at Viggo and I when we chuckled.

"You mean the murder case?" Viggo asked.

"Yes, that!" Bryn said, waving an impatient hand.

"Unfortunately, I found nothing new. I decided to question the

guards that had been patrolling the lower ward and the other parts of the outer wall. After some coaxing, one guard finally admitted to being knocked unconscious."

I sat up straighter. "And he awoke to find his dagger missing?"

Viggo nodded. "He was so remorseful; he wanted to quit his job. I would have let him if he had been doing something questionable or had allowed himself to be distracted, but he said he had merely been walking his designated perimeter when he heard quick footsteps behind him. As he turned, he received a hard hit to the side of his head. He had the lump to prove it."

"He didn't remember anything about his attacker?" I asked. "Surely, he smelled or heard or saw something before he was hit."

"He was patrolling the area near the laundry house. All he claims to have heard was running water and all he claims to have smelled was soap and grass. He believes the person was small and dressed in dark clothes, however. Anyone else would have been noticed by the guard patrolling the chapel and school area."

"So…" I lowered my voice as a server passed our booth. "One of the servants or another guard murdered the counselor."

"Or you are meant to believe they did," Bryn said around a mouthful of potatoes.

Viggo and I shared a knowing look.

"I should question the servants and off-duty guards," Viggo said.

"Along with the workers here at the pub, yes," I agreed.

"Have you tried talking to the counselor's children?" Bryn asked once he had swallowed.

Viggo blinked in surprise. "No. Of course not."

"We don't want to alarm them unnecessarily," I said.

Bryn cut his steak into smaller pieces. "A funeral is being held for this counselor, isn't there? What is his family saying the cause of death was?"

"A heart attack," Viggo replied. "Why?"

Bryn shrugged. "You would be surprised how observant and talkative children can be. The fact that they are often overlooked makes them the best informants."

"Prince Haskell," I said as an idea came to me.

Viggo and Bryn raised their eyebrows. "What about him?"

"He has a habit of perching near the school's bell tower and listening in on the conversations happening below. He might have similar perches all over the hill. He could be of some use to the investigation."

"I wouldn't want to put the young prince in danger by making him my informant," Viggo said. "What if the killer still lurks on the grounds? What if he—?"

“Or she,” Bryn said, raising his fork.

“Or she,” Viggo added with a roll of his eyes, “intends to kill again?”

“But what if the killer has already left?” I countered. “What if another guard saw something that night and, like our poor bruised friend, is hesitant to come forward with his information? What if he would rather confide and gossip with his friends than confess to the assistant guard master? And if Haskell is hidden in the right place at the right time, word could reach you in a matter of minutes.”

Viggo mulled this over while moving the vegetables across his plate. A group of boisterous guards in a booth across from us harassed the server for more mead. The barkeep had to intervene and kindly ask the group to leave because they had already drunk their limit for the night. Grumbling, they retrieved their coats and stumbled out of the pub like a herd of sleepy cows.

“All right, it’s a good idea,” Viggo finally murmured out of the corner of his mouth. “But if new evidence surfaces that proves the killer is still here somewhere and planning to kill again—”

“Then we’ll tell Haskell his services are no longer needed,” I said. “And we’ll make Helka promise to never let him out of her sight.”

Bryn leaned over and spilled his stomach contents all over the floor.

Viggo sighed and stood. “That’s his way of saying he’s ready to go home. Can you—?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, fishing out my coin purse. “But only this once. Ladies aren’t supposed to pay for their food.”

“Says who?” Viggo said with a scoff.

“Says my…” The coins fell out of my hand and onto the table with a clatter. “My father.” The words sounded strange in my mouth. Suddenly, I pictured him in my mind’s eye, sitting at the foot of a table in a tavern in Kenshore, praising Kustaav for volunteering to pay for my meal. My mother sat beside him, shaking her head with the faintest of smiles, proud of my father, the gentleman. Sylvi reached over to pat Torsten’s arm before he could jump to his feet and pay for her food.

Tears pricked my eyes.

Viggo took my hand. I blinked and returned to myself.

He knelt beside me, copper eyes fixed on mine despite the fact that Bryn had vomited on the server’s shoes and she was hopping away in disgust.

“My mother died when I was very young,” Viggo whispered. “Bryn’s mother was the only one I ever truly knew. She checked in on me and my sisters while my father worked at the textile mill. She always brought us extra groceries and medicines and inquired about

us personally. When she was murdered…" The muscles in his jaw worked as he struggled against his grief. "I can't describe the pain I felt, but I know it when I see it. Don't let it tear you apart, Asta, or there will be nothing left of you when your family is avenged." He squeezed my hand. "And they *will* be avenged. I promise."

I forced myself to breathe.

The server returned with a mop and a bucket of soapy water. Bryn apologized at least four times, and she managed to clean up a good portion of the vomit before I found my voice. "You have sisters?"

Viggo's intense expression switched to a grin. "Yes, one older, one younger."

I wiped my eyes with my free hand, thankful I had decided against makeup this morning. "And who takes care of them now that you're gone?"

"Bara, the oldest, is married to a baker who lives down the street from my father's house. She takes care of Fallon."

"And what was your name before you entered the academy?" I asked, suddenly realizing that I didn't know.

Viggo shook his head and rose. "I'll never tell."

"Why not?"

He left my side to help Bryn stand. "Because I like Viggo better. That's why." He gave his friend a harsh look when Bryn opened his mouth. "If you tell her, everyone on the hill will know what happened between you and Fia."

"Understood," Bryn said, head bowed.

"Wait. What happened between Bryn and Fia?" I asked.

"A story for another time," Bryn said with a half smile. "Goodnight, Asta."

I stood. "I'll walk you out."

"We apologize for the mess," Viggo told the server, who glared at him and wordlessly continued scrubbing the floor.

I left three extra coins for her before following the men out of the pub. Lennart stood leaning against a decorative barrel, but pushed away from it when he saw us exiting the building. "Lady Isa, might I have a word?"

I bid Viggo and Bryn goodnight before approaching my fellow bodyguard. "What is it?"

"Has your friend found time to ask the other counselors about Odalis's assignments?" he asked.

I blinked. "You've been waiting out here for who knows how long to ask me about a case that isn't even yours?"

Lennart shrugged. "I overheard Master Viggo updating your friend Bryn on the case, but he failed to mention the outcome of his conversations with the counselors."

The possibility that he overheard the conversation concerning my family made me panic. “Eavesdropping is rude!”

He raised his eyebrows and waited.

“He hasn’t had the time,” I said once I’d composed myself.

My fellow Defender smiled lazily. “Well, then it’s a good thing I remembered to check in on the counselors today.”

“What did you learn?” I asked, unable to hide my curiosity.

“The counselors take turns judging the people,” Lennart said. “Counselor Odalis was in the middle of judging the case of a young woman who claims to have been raped by her neighbor.”

“Was the court in her favor?” I asked, although I thought I knew the answer.

“No, and her father was quite upset about it.” Lennart put his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. “Perhaps your friend could find some time to bring the gentleman to the hill for questioning.”

I frowned. “Don’t you have a poisoning to investigate?”

Lennart made a razzing sound. “It was one of the king’s household servants. Finley is the master of interrogations. Once enough pressure was put on the staff, they turned in the perpetrator. She’s been imprisoned and is awaiting her trial. Although I’m fairly certain attempting to assassinate a king is high treason and punishable by death. If your friend needs some help, I’d be happy to—”

“He doesn’t need your help,” I snapped. “He just needs more time.”

“I was going to say, I’d be happy to ask Finley to give him a few tips,” Lennart said with a smirk. “I’m not good at questioning and intimidating. I only took the job as Defender to have an excuse to fight to the death with a complete stranger on a weekly basis.”

I shook my head in disgust. “You’re an animal.”

He grinned devilishly. “Yes, but the king hasn’t been killed on my watch yet. So I suppose I can live with myself.”

Finley emerged from the pub. “Lennart.”

He turned to face his colleague.

“You’re supposed to be keeping an eye on Gabor. You know how he gets when he’s drunk. Where is he?” Finley asked as he drew near.

“I haven’t the faintest idea, but I’ll begin searching for him right away.” Lennart winked at me before he departed. “Have a good night, Lady Isa.”

I sighed through my teeth after his retreating form. I swiveled around to face Finley. “Can you *please* tell me how you do it?”

“Do what?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

“Get Lennart to be cordial and obedient! He’s an insufferable little beast when you’re not around, but the moment you step onto the

scene—”

“He’s still an insufferable little beast,” Finley snorted. “He just obeys me because I saved his life.”

“Oh, is that all?” I grumbled.

“The fact that you’re an attractive woman might explain why he’s so fond of annoying you,” Finley said. “But if you don’t react when he tries to goad you, he’ll eventually become bored and treat you like any other peer.”

I sputtered. “You think I’m—”

“No, but they do. Why do you think it’s so difficult for them to take you seriously?”

“But you do,” I said. “Take me seriously, I mean.”

Finley thought about it, face scrunched. “No, not really, but I can see how hard you’re trying. It’s admirable. That and I have a wife, so respect toward women comes more naturally to me than it does to Lennart and Gabor. Speaking of which, I have a favor to ask of you.” He stepped toward me, suddenly anxious. “Can you watch the king for me tomorrow? I’m scheduled to guard with Gabor.”

I groaned. “Gabor is worse than Lennart!”

Finley held his hands out as if to placate me. “I know, but it’s my daughter’s birthday. I can’t miss it.”

I rolled my shoulders, hoping to relieve the tension already beginning to build there. “I suppose I can sacrifice a day off for your daughter’s sake.”

“I greatly appreciate it, Lady Isa,” he said with a smile.

Haskell joined the king and me in the breakfast nook the next morning. He happily agreed to be Viggo’s spy with the condition that one extra gold coin be added to his allowance. I made him swear to the Heavenly Masters that he wouldn’t tell anyone of his special assignment and then we shook on it.

“I hope this works,” the king said as he watched his half brother leave. “I would like to be able to tell Odalis’s family that we’ve caught his murderer before the funeral. They need the closure.”

I agreed.

Torvald leaned against the table, eyes dark with worry. “But if anything happens to Haskell—”

“Sire, if there is even a hint of danger, he’ll be taken off this assignment immediately. I promise.”

He nodded. “Good.”

The king’s errand man entered the nook and bowed. “This arrived for you, my lord. It’s from the professor.”

“Thank you, Darnell,” Torvald said, accepting the flat box he was handed. “Any word from the men I sent with General Halvar?”

“Not yet, sire, but I’ll alert you the moment I hear from them.”

“Thank you. You are dismissed.”

Darnell bowed once more and bid me good morning before he retreated.

I watched the king open his parcel with the butter knife. “Are those the results from the tests run on your diplomats’ letters?”

Torvald removed the pages from their box. “They have to be. I told the professor not to contact me until the tests were done.” He took a moment to read the professor’s notes, then frowned. “The professor found traces of salt water, cannon powder, and the pollen of a flower that only grows along the coast of the mainland. The parchment of these documents was most definitely from overseas. As for the handwriting… it seems the professor was able to find minute differences between the sample of writing I gave and the accounts I received from Halvar. Added pressure to the quill, darker ink, more mistakes. He can only guess that these are a result of emotional stress or nerves on the writer’s end.”

I couldn’t hide my disappointment. “That doesn’t help us very much, does it?”

He set the report aside and glanced at the documents. “It means my diplomats are alive. Halvar has to be holding them hostage somewhere, forcing them to write whatever he tells them…”

I didn’t know whether that was good news or bad.

“I chose them for this mission,” Torvald said, lowering his voice. “I must see them safely returned.”

“Their fate isn’t your fault, sire.”

He placed the pages back in their box, brow set. “Maybe not. But it *is* my fault Halvar has so much power over the militia. Perhaps if I were a more commanding leader and less of a crowd pleaser, they wouldn’t have agreed to follow him on his blasted crusade.” He shoved the box aside and attacked his eggs with the fork. “Perhaps one man would have stood against him in the name of his king.”

“Perhaps some did, my lord,” I tried to encourage him by saying. “Perhaps the general had them killed to discourage anyone else from rebelling against him and his plan. Halvar may be feared, but you are loved among your people. Isn’t that better?”

Torvald sighed. “Under the circumstances, I don’t think it is.” He aimed a soft smile my way, as if he could see how his attitude was affecting me. “We’ll keep looking, Asta. He will be condemned. I promise.”

I nodded despite my own distress and tried to be positive. It had only been a few days since the inquiry began, after all. Once we had finished our breakfast, the king ventured upstairs for his crown and cravat. Or so I thought. When he descended, he was dressed in riding

gear.

"I'll be entertaining Kalea today," Torvald said while pulling on a riding glove. "If at any point you become uncomfortable or weary of our company, feel free to put some distance between us. You can tell Gabor to do the same."

I smiled. "Thank you, Your Majesty, but we need to be near enough to pull you out of harm's way at a second's notice."

Torvald twisted his other riding glove and averted his gaze.

"But," I amended, "we can remain a step or two behind if you would rather not have an audience."

He relaxed. "Thank you for understanding." Then he pulled open the door and walked out.

* * *

The king and Kalea raced their horses along the grassy northern side of the island, behind the royal hill. I was surprised Kalea could ride so well in a dress. From a distance, I sat on Malie's back and watched their progress. Another alteration I had requested of Thora was to make trousers out of flowing skirts. When I was standing, one could easily mistake the poofy fabric as one article, but I could run and ride comfortably because they were in fact pants. This particular pair I wore was made of red velvet. I had felt practically royal in my frilly white blouse and new riding boots this morning. I found it hard to summon my earlier elation now, however, especially with Gabor making court jester jokes whenever he circled by.

Torvald and Kalea seemed to be having a wonderful time. Every once in a while, they would return to me for something to drink because I carried the picnic basket. Then they would resume their game. I watched them laugh and tease each other as their horses galloped across the green. Eventually, their horses slowed to trot around patches of wild flowers. Torvald and Kalea's voices became low, intimate murmurs. Kalea was no fool; she knew why she'd been relieved of her teaching duties by a substitute five minutes before her class was supposed to start and asked to go on an outing with the king. Her face was red and she smiled a lot, but she didn't ask Torvald outright what his intentions were. She seemed content to wait for him to explain in his own time.

When lunchtime came, I threw a blanket out over the grass and unpacked the picnic. Kalea insisted on serving us very generous portions of everything. Gabor inhaled the food placed before him like some sort of vicious animal. I could barely stand once I was through with the meal, I was so full. I hoped no assassins decided to pay us a

visit until I had finished digesting, otherwise both the king's and his bride-to-be's safety would be entirely in Gabor's hands. I shuddered at the thought.

Once the couple grew tired of the grass and the gentle breeze, we all mounted our horses and Torvald led the way into the city. We traveled along the western side of the island and down to the pier where one of the king's ships awaited us.

The captain met us by the dock. "Welcome, Your Majesty."

Kalea gasped. "Are we going sailing?"

The king dismounted. "Have you ever been on the open ocean? I hear it's an experience everyone must enjoy at least once in their lives." He smiled at me over his shoulder.

I managed a smile for the king, but dropped it the moment his back was turned. I began to tremble. Memories of the last time I had been on a ship made me want to dig my heels into Malie's sides and hang on for dear life.

"I haven't been since I was a girl," Kalea said, accepting the king's hand. He helped her dismount. "I've always wanted to return to the ocean."

I tried to reason with the frantic heart determined to leap out of my chest. *It's going to be fine. No one is going to hurt you. Just dismount as calmly as possible*. I forced my joints to unlock and then slid off my horse, eyes fixed on the ship looming before me.

"What's the matter, Lady Warrior?" Gabor sneered from his steed. "Did you never learn how to swim?"

I scowled at him. "I can swim."

A pair of seamen took our horses and led them into the stables aboard the ship. The four of us followed the captain on deck. I gripped the ratlines and faced the sea, taking deep breaths. Fortunately, there was only one person aboard who seemed to find my behavior odd. Unfortunately, that person was Gabor.

"Is the poor, delicate court jester prone to seasickness?" he leaned down to murmur.

I curled my lip. "Come any closer and the next few words out of your mouth will be, 'My nose! My nose has been wrenched clean off my ugly face!'"

Gabor chuckled and proceeded to walk the deck.

Torvald strolled around with Kalea while the seamen prepared to cast off. He named each part of the ship and explained its purpose, spoke about the materials used to build each piece and where they came from, and even commented on the weather and pointed out the seagulls lounging at the top of the masts. He was nervous but at least he was prepared. I had to wonder when he'd found the time to study sea vessels. As the ship cast off and took us into open waters, Torvald

and Kalea stood by the railing by the bowsprit. Kalea took the king's elbow and leaned against his shoulder as they gazed across the horizon.

I saw my parents in my mind's eye, holding a similar pose when Kustaav took us out on his schooner. Tearing my gaze away, I decided now would be a good time to go below deck to search for possible threats. I tugged open the hatch and ducked down the stairs, into the hold.

That was a terrible idea. It was as if I had descended into a nightmare. The wood beneath me creaked. The temperature had dropped a few degrees but it might as well have been freezing; goosebumps sprouted all over my skin. The dim hall stretched out before me, seemingly forever. I could hear my own screams vibrating in my skull, the crack of whips, the sharpening of knives. I could almost see General Halvar's face looming before me. I spun around with the intention of sprinting back to the light and came face to face with Gabor.

"Get out of my way," I hissed.

He planted himself in the doorway. "What is it about this ship that you find so terrifying?"

"So help me, mongrel, if you don't move—"

"You'll what?" He stepped forward, forcing me to stumble back. "You'll challenge me to a grappling match and humiliate me in front of all these seamen?"

I struck him twice in the throat. He made a choking sound and fell to the side, throwing a hand out against the wall to steady himself. A kick to the groin sent him to the floor. I hopped over him and raced up the stairs as if the memories of my nightly sessions with General Halvar were chasing me. Once back on the deck, I gulped in greedy breaths of fresh air. I was so sick with emotion I thought I would vomit. I stumbled to the side of the ship and leaned out, waiting for the heaving to begin.

"Lady Isa!" Kalea exclaimed. "Are you well?" She hurried to my side and placed a hand over my bent back.

"I didn't realize you would get seasick," Torvald said, coming around to my other side. "From our previous conversation, I thought —"

"I'm not seasick," I said feebly. "I just need a moment."

"Sailor! Some chilled wine for Lady Isa!" Torvald called to one of the seamen.

"And a moist towel," Kalea added. "She's looking dreadfully pale."

I eased onto the deck's floor and shut my eyes to fight the nausea. And the shame. A goblet was presented to me a moment later, along

with a fresh, moist towel. I sipped the wine as Kalea patted my face. While I appreciated her kindness, all I truly wanted was to be invisible.

"Should we go back?" Torvald asked, kneeling beside me.

"No!" I lowered my voice and tried to smile. "No, my lord. Don't spoil your evening on my account. The wine is doing me much good. I'll be all right soon. You'll see."

At last, they stepped back. They kept a close eye on me until dinnertime but at least they stopped hovering. Gabor eventually emerged from below deck, red as a sunburn and angrier than a swarm of bees, but he dared not get his revenge while the king was near.

A table was brought out along with some chairs and a three-course meal. A group of four sailors produced stringed instruments and began to serenade us. The sunset turned the water into a stream of oranges and pinks. Though the temperature dropped, the torches and extra coats provided by the captain kept us warm. With some more food in my belly and the soothing music dancing around my head, my nausea finally disappeared. When Torvald asked Kalea to dance, however, I excused myself and climbed up the ratlines to the crow's nest.

There I remained until the ship turned around and began taking us home. I told myself it was for surveillance purposes and ignored the tears that fell. Kenshore lay several thousand miles to the east. I found my eyes being drawn to the horizon there, my thoughts lingering on General Halvar and the devastation he was no doubt causing at that very moment. The same panic and helplessness I'd felt while watching the king choke on poison returned. For even with all my training, I was still helpless to stop that madman from conquering the rest of the free world and turning it to ash.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Gabor grabbed my arm the moment the king had disappeared up the stairs. “I have a score to settle with you.”

“I *was* seasick, all right?” I said, scratching at his meaty hand. “I was about to vomit but you wouldn’t move out of my way. I had to do something or you would’ve been bathed in my sick. Now let me go!”

“You caught me off guard,” he leaned in to say. “Otherwise your strikes would’ve never landed.”

“Yes, fine,” I said, leaning back from his horrible breath. “Release me!”

Gabor tossed me aside like a rag doll. I collided against the wooden paling of the staircase.

He rolled his massive shoulders. “The next time you make a move against me, I’m striking back.” Then he lumbered out of the king’s house.

I glowered after him and rubbed my arm, still stinging from his grip. The events of the evening sloshed around my brain. Despite the chill in the air outside that seemed to be leaking into the house, I was unbearably warm. I waited until Hemming and Lennart came to relieve me, then sprinted across the ward.

I grabbed the front of Viggo’s shirt and dragged him out of his room. “Spar with me.”

“What? Now? Have you lost your mind?”

A door opened across the hall and Bryn poked his head out. “Asta? Is everything all right?”

“Would I bother you in the middle of the night if everything was all right?” I snapped, dragging Viggo out into the hall.

Viggo twisted out of my grip and brushed off the front of his lounging shirt. “Calm down and explain yourself.”

I spun around to glare at my friend, wanting to scream, wanting to cry, wanting to punch him in the nose. My emotions must have been written on my face because Viggo’s expression softened.

“Asta,” he said, voice low. “What’s wrong?”

I gritted my teeth and blinked away tears. “The king and his bride-to-be went sailing today. I had nothing to do but remember the last time I was aboard a ship and why I hate the general so much. Gabor witnessed my weakness and, if I don’t spar with you right this minute, *I’m going to destroy this building with my bare hands!*”

“Keep your voice down,” Viggo said, his eyes shifting to the rows of closed doors on either side of us. “You’ll wake the off-duty guards.”

I took a deep breath and held it to keep from screaming.

"Viggo," Bryn whispered.

Viggo half turned and they shared a meaningful look. When Viggo looked at me again, there was a flicker of uncertainty in his copper eyes. Then he held out his arms and took a cautious step toward me, as if I was made of glass and he could break me if he moved too quickly. Before I could register what he was doing, his arms were around me and my nose was pressed against his sternum. Warmth radiated from his body, through my clothes, through my very skin. It was different than the heat of my anger. It was a soothing warmth that chased away my raging emotions. His heart thumped beneath my splayed fingers. His breath touched the top of my head, moved the hair gathered there.

I hid my face in Viggo's shirt and wept. I cried for the hatred I felt for Halvar, the frustration I felt for Gabor and Lennart, for the destruction of Kenshore, for the loss of my family, and for the loss of Kustaav and the future we might have had together. I cried over this hopeless, terrifying mystery that was my future. I allowed myself to be overwhelmed by exhaustion, by the stress of the job, by the loneliness I didn't even know I'd been fighting. All the while, Viggo stood there and held me. Eventually, he ushered me into Bryn's room, where an endless supply of handkerchiefs were waiting for me. When I couldn't produce any more tears, I shut my eyes and slept.

I woke the next morning to an empty room and a headache. A pitcher of water and a glass waited for me on Bryn's bedside table, along with a fresh change of clothes. Another one of my two-piece dresses, to be precise, with orange, red, and blue stripes. I sat up with a start, wondering how the dress managed to find its way here. Then panic jolted through me because it was morning and I wasn't where I was supposed to be. I gulped down two glasses of water and splashed my face with the water that remained. After hurrying into my new clothes and wrestling my hair into a braid, I opened the door a crack and peeked outside to be sure no one was in the hall. Then I snuck out and tiptoed down the stairs.

I'll have to come back with a sack of some kind and retrieve yesterday's clothes…

Once out in the lower ward, I squinted against the rising sun. If the night guards piling into their quarters for some rest thought it strange to see me on their doorstep, they gave no indication. They shuffled by me, eyes half lidded. I walked past the children walking to school and the servants on their way to their morning chores.

"Lady Isa!"

I swiveled around to see Kalea approaching me from the school. I forced a smile. "Good morning, Miss Kalea."

She stopped a pace or two away from me, cautious. “Good morning to you. Are you lost?”

A flicker of annoyance made my words come out harsher than I anticipated. “I’ve memorized the designs of the hill and have patrolled its walls many times. I’m not lost.”

Kalea blinked but held my gaze. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend. It’s only… I’ve never seen you in the lower ward at this time of day. Especially not without Torvald.”

“Yes, well, as I mentioned earlier, I often join the night guard in patrolling the walls. I’m merely late in returning to the king’s house is all,” I quickly lied. “I really should be going now. It was nice to see you again.” I dipped into a quick curtsey and continued my swift walk to the stone steps.

“My lady? A moment?”

I dug my heels into the grass and waited for her to catch up.

She came slowly, biting her lip.

I did better at hiding my annoyance this time. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry if yesterday was awkward for you,” Kalea said, once again looking into my eyes. “I’ve never spent an entire day with a man, much less Torvald. I’m still learning how to behave around him and around you.”

“I thought your behavior was perfectly appropriate,” I said because it was true. Her unwavering gaze made me uncomfortable. Very few people could hold my glowing stare. I didn’t know if I should be impressed or troubled.

Kalea smiled, clearly relieved. “I’m glad to hear it. If things progress between the king and I…” She blushed. “I don’t wish to sound overly confident, my lady, but if his intentions are what I believe them to be, you and I will be spending much more time together.” She reached out and gripped my hand. “It’s important to me that we be friends.”

“If it’s important to you, then we will be,” I said, caught off guard.

Kalea gave my hand a squeeze. “Thank you. This makes me very happy.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

She released me and stepped back. “I have to return to my class now, but I hope to see you again soon.”

“As do I.” I jogged up the stone steps and walked across the upper ward, smiling and nodding to anyone who caught my eye.

Once in the king’s home, I peeked into the nook and let out a sigh of relief. Torvald wasn’t there yet. I did catch a glimpse of Bryn through the door as a servant came out of the kitchen with breakfast plates. I snuck in.

My friend, the new Poison Detector and Food Processor, stood by a counter with a stack of parchment in his hands and a quill behind his ear. It was odd seeing him out of his medical student's garb, but he did seem more comfortable in Dotharr's Academy's traditional lounging clothes. His brand new documentation plaque hung from his neck, gleaming against the dull color of his shirt. One servant stood beside him while the cook and the other servants rushed about, preparing the king's breakfast.

"Next on the list is the prepared pork for tomorrow evening's dinner," Bryn said. "Where might I find that?"

"It was delivered yesterday along with potatoes, carrots, and greens," the servant beside him reported. "The pork will be found in the ice box. The potatoes, carrots, and greens are stored in the pantry."

"Has anyone been seen handling them aside from the delivery men?" Bryn asked, using the quill to make a note on the parchment.

"I moved the sack of potatoes out of the way when our bread shipment came in," the servant said.

"And I can trust that you didn't slip poison into the potatoes when you did?"

The servant bowed his head. "I would never, sir."

"Glad to hear it." Bryn caught me watching and smiled. "Well, good morning, Lady Isa."

"Good morning, Master Brynjar. Might I have a word?"

Bryn put the quill behind his ear again and handed the parchment to the servant. "I'll be back in a moment."

We exited the kitchen, dodged the servants crowding the nook, and convened at the foot of the stairs. I opened my mouth to speak, but paused when two maids with fresh linens walked across the upper story.

"I'm sorry about last night," I said once they were gone.

He shook his head. "There's nothing to apologize for. You're under a lot of stress."

"I assume you told Dagmar what happened," I said, thinking about my fresh clothes.

"We simply told her you fell asleep somewhere other than your room and would be needing new clothes when you woke."

I bit back a smile. "How did she take it?"

"Not well," he said, running a hand down his face. "She threatened us with torture, eviction from the royal hill, and banishment from the island if we didn't tell her exactly where you were and why she couldn't see you. I also think the words 'hoodlums' and 'cretins' were used."

I giggled. "You poor things."

“We assured her that you were fine about a hundred times. Not that it did much good,” Bryn murmured. “That woman really doesn’t like us. What eventually calmed her was Viggo saying that you were in desperate need of an evening alone and if she didn’t supply us with some new clothes, you would be forced to scandalously stumble back to the king’s home in last night’s clothing. I think it’s safe to assume your handmaiden would do anything to protect your reputation.”

“I’ll be sure to thank her for her understanding when I see her next. I assume you made arrangements for the king’s protection while I was… out?”

“Viggo roused Finley out of bed. They took turns patrolling the grounds and marching the halls of the house.”

I thought about Viggo’s arms around me and the warmth radiating from his skin, and blushed. “He didn’t have to do that.”

“None of us *have* to do anything, do we? But we do so anyway out of the goodness of our hearts,” Bryn said with a hand over his chest.

I squinted at him. “Have you been pestering him about being nice to me?”

Bryn’s eyes grew wide and innocent. “Of course not. That would be meddling, and I don’t meddle.”

“Viggo’s a grown man,” I said, frowning. “You can’t dictate his actions. We both know we will always be friends. He can treat me however he likes.” I raised a hand to keep Bryn from commenting. “Within reason, of course. It’s been over a year since he’s made me feel inferior or slighted, and that’s enough for me.”

“Yes, but even if he wanted to show affection, he wouldn’t,” Bryn said, suddenly irritated. “The only affection he ever received was from my mother and his sisters. I’m afraid he’s been away from them too long to recognize the feeling.”

“You’re being dramatic. He’s affectionate with you.”

Bryn waved my words away. “Yes, but that’s only because he never had a brother.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Why would he treat you differently if he did have one?”

“Because he wouldn’t need my company anymore,” Bryn said, brow furrowed as if he couldn’t understand why I was confused.

“You’re not making sense on purpose, aren’t you?” I grumbled.

He laughed. “It’s early. You’re still waking up. Have some toast and jam. Have some eggs. Oh, and juice! The juice here is incredible.”

I snorted. “It’s only juice.”

Bryn raised a finger. “Squeezed fresh every morning. It’s nothing like the juice at Ishem’s or Dotharr’s Academy.”

“We never had juice at the academy,” I said.

Bryn smirked. “Bode did.”

“Naturally, you tried some.”

“Just to annoy him.”

The thought of warrior academy brought another to mind. “Have you had any contact with your father?”

Bryn’s deflation made me regret the question. “I wrote him once I was settled into Ishem’s lofts. I told him how sorry I was that we couldn’t come to an agreement about medical school. I even apologized for breaking into his impenetrable safe. He came to school the next morning and tried to force me to come back to the academy. The guards had to roughly escort him off the grounds. I haven’t written to him since.”

“I’m so sorry, Behnam,” I said, hoping the name his mother had given him would remind him that one parent would’ve been proud of his life choices.

He smiled wearily. “It’s all right, Asta. I’ve given up trying to be on good terms with him. He’ll never be satisfied with me.”

“That can’t be true. Why don’t you write and tell him about recent events? You’re working for King Torvald and living on the royal hill now. Who wouldn’t be proud of that?”

“I don’t think I’d ever be able to live with the embarrassment if he tried to break in here and force me back to the academy.” He shook his head when I tried to argue further. “Let the matter be. When he’s ready to make amends, he’ll find me.”

Viggo scampered across the second story, looked over his shoulder, and came down the stairs, taking them two at a time. He nearly ran into us. “What are you doing here, Bryn? Dagmar will drag you out of the house by your mustache if she catches you loitering!”

Bryn put a protective hand over his face. “I’ll see you later, Asta.” Then he ran back to the kitchen.

“You should stop teasing him about the mustache. It’s actually growing out nicely.”

“I wasn’t teasing. I was directly quoting your handmaiden,” Viggo said. “How’re you feeling?”

My eyes were drawn to his arms. He must have gotten warm while walking the halls because he had rolled up his sleeves. I forced myself to meet his gaze. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? You look flushed.”

I slapped both hands against my cheeks to hide the redness then quickly lowered them when I realized how silly I was being. “It’s warmer in here than I expected.”

Thankfully, Viggo didn’t comment on my ridiculous rambling. “Don’t be afraid to ask for help, Asta. Much *is* expected of you, but you’re allowed to come to your friends when you’re overwhelmed. If you don’t, then… what are we for?”

“What indeed?” I said, abashed.

Viggo sighed. “Don’t look so contrite. I’m not scolding you. You did nothing wrong.”

I nodded. “Thank you for doing my job.”

“You would have done the same for me,” Viggo said with an easy smile.

“And for…” Heat crept up my cheeks once more.

Viggo’s smile drooped as his ears turned pink. “I only did what I thought was needed. If you think it was inappropriate—”

“Would it be inappropriate for you to hug Bryn?” I asked with a forced laugh.

“It would be odd,” he admitted with a wrinkled nose, “but not inappropriate, no.”

“Then it shouldn’t be inappropriate for us to hug every once in a while. We’re friends just as you and Bryn are, right?”

He scratched the back of his neck and looked away. “Yes, of course.”

“Good morning, my lady.”

I jumped and looked up to see Dagmar bearing down on me from the second story. “Good morning, Dagmar.”

“What on earth have you done with your hair?” she asked. “You can’t possibly join the master for breakfast looking like that! Come upstairs immediately.”

“I’ll be there in a moment.”

She narrowed her eyes at my friend. “Master Viggo.”

“Mistress Dagmar. Until we meet again,” Viggo said with a quick bow.

My handmaiden *hmmphed* and retreated to my room.

Viggo shuddered and tugged his sleeves back down. “That woman is going to give me nightmares.”

“Will you be able to sleep?” I asked, determined to put the awkwardness behind us.

“Perhaps for a few hours,” Viggo said, fastening the buttons at his wrists.

“Master Philo doesn’t allow you to have a day off?”

He went to retrieve his coat from the closet. “Not when there’s a killer on the loose.”

“You can’t prove the assassin is still here,” I said. “Give yourself at least five hours of sleep. You’ll wake up feeling like your head weighs more than a ton of bricks, but that will wear off once you…”

Viggo swiveled around slowly with his coat in hand, mouth twisting.

Dread descended. “Was there another murder?”

“Counselors Cade and Ganix treated themselves to the best mead

Thistle Pub has to offer last night, then left the building, and disappeared. They were found in the moat at three this morning with lumps on their heads and lungs full of tar."

My stomach turned. "Did anyone see anything? Do you have suspects?"

"I only just heard at three this morning, Asta," he said, shrugging on his coat. "I haven't even begun my investigation."

"I'll start questioning people while you take a nap," I said. "Bryn can skip his studies for today and help Hemming guard the king. I'm sure he won't mind."

"He might. It isn't what he signed up for."

"But you can't stay awake any longer. You need to sleep."

Viggo raised both hands. "You're right about that, but guarding the king is your responsibility. I'll have Bryn help me with the investigation once he's through testing the king's food for toxins."

"So I'm to wait around for answers like before?" I asked with a huff. "I'll go mad with anticipation!"

"Find Prince Haskell," Viggo said on his way to the nook. "Tell him he isn't our spy anymore. I'll alert Master Philo of the situation and have guards watch over the counselors. I think it's safe to assume they're being targeted."

"Yes, but why?" I said. "What is their importance?"

Viggo paused at the kitchen door. "They speak for the good of the people. Perhaps they haven't been listening to the *right* people."

"That reminds me," I said with a snap of my fingers. "Lennart mentioned Counselor Odalis was acting as judge for a case that was not going in the victim's favor. It might be wise to call the victim's father to the hill and question him. The three murders might very well be unrelated, but if that man is proven innocent, perhaps an assignment these counselors were working on *together* resulted in their deaths. Ask a scribe for the records of every meeting that took place in the last few weeks involving the three counselors. I can help sift through them in my spare time if you'd like. Send me a stack."

"Good idea. I'll have Bryn do that first," he said.

"Have him pay a visit to Dr. Ichiro next. The more we know about the bodies, the easier it will be to piece together what happened."

Viggo's mouth twitched. "Yes, thank you, Chief Inspector Asta. Now, don't you have some guarding to do?"

I stuck my tongue out at him before going upstairs.

After Dagmar had abused my scalp and interrogated me for twenty minutes, I escaped with the excuse that I needed to report to the king. I suddenly remembered the last time I'd had all of my hair piled on the top of my head. It was for a party my father was throwing

for me for my eighteenth birthday. It had made my head throb then too. I tugged out the pins keeping half of my hair up and massaged my scalp as I walked down the hall. A thump and a muffled shout had me sprinting to Torvald's room.

"Call Dr. Ichiro!" I shouted to a maid as I flew past.

I tugged on the ties keeping my skirts around my waist, but came to a halt when I realized I wasn't wearing tights underneath. Dagmar didn't know about my ideas for suitable underclothes so, naturally, she hadn't thought to include them with my outfit this morning. I retied the cords with hissed curses.

I'll just have to fight in my dress, I decided, charging into Torvald's bedroom.

A masked assassin met me at the door with a pair of curved knives. He stopped short when he saw me. I rushed him. He swung both blades in a scissor-like motion. I fell to my knees, sliding under the reach of his blades, and swinging my arms out and around. My fists made contact with the sides of his knees, throwing him off balance. He staggered back with a grunt. I stood and kicked one of the blades out of his hand a moment later. It fell on the floor and slid under the bed somewhere. I spared a glance about the room. Finley grappled with another masked fighter on the floor. King Torvald seemed to be properly guarding his face as his assailant threw punch after punch. At least he knew *some* self-defense. I had to end this quickly and come to his aid.

As I passed the tea table, I picked up the vase and launched it at my opponent. He broke the china into pieces with another swipe of his blade, but I used the momentary distraction to attack his torso. Two strategic punches just below the ribcage caused him to spit blood at my face. I let out a groan of disgust and quickly ran a hand over my eyes just as he thrust his knife in my direction. I leaned back, twisted, and dodged his every jab, surprised at his speed.

Like Viggo had on graduation day, I blocked one of my enemy's swings, wrapped my fingers around his wrist, and held it off to the side while I cuffed him in the face. He responded with a slap across my ear. I let out a shout as pain and a high-pitched whine traveled through my head. My grip on his wrist loosened and his knife-wielding hand was free. I put a hand over my ear, feeling blood. A quick shake of the head had my vision cleared and just in time too. I dodged another jab, grabbed his arm, and threw him back. One, two, three times I slammed his knife-wielding arm against the wall before he released his weapon. I threw a knee to his groin; he boxed my injured ear. I stumbled to the side, pain making me see white.

His next few punches were aimed at my face and torso, most of which I blocked, some of which landed and drove me back. I scooped

a piece of broken china from the floor when I heard the king cry out in pain. Then I spun and hurled my weapon at the assassin bearing down on Torvald. The sharp sliver of china sank into the back of the assassin's neck. He uttered a garbled cry before he fell against the king and was still. My attacker chose that moment to tackle me into the tea table.

Torvald hefted the stranger's body off and to the side. "Lady Isa!"

Struggling under a body much heavier than mine, I wrestled with arms that reached for my neck. His hands found their way around my throat. I twisted and squirmed; I swung my fists and kicked. His grip didn't loosen. Somewhere above and behind this man's head, I glimpsed the king charging toward us with a curved blade in hand. He drove it into my attacker's back. The assassin snarled, released me to punch Torvald across the face, and turned back to continue strangling me. Finley appeared out of nowhere and drove his sword through my attacker's back. Blood spurted from his chest and splattered across mine. But he finally collapsed over me.

I coughed and drew in deep breaths, head throbbing, lungs aching.

"You're welcome," Finley croaked, and then he fell.

"Fin!" The king scrambled to his feet and raced to his Defender.

Once I'd wriggled out from under the dead body, I crawled over to them.

Finley's right eye was already beginning to purple, sweat made his hair stick to his forehead, and blood dribbled from his lips.

"I can't see what ails him," the king said, frantically searching for a puncture wound along Finley's torso.

"Help me turn him over," I said, reaching for Finley's arm. "Perhaps he was stabbed in the back."

We rolled him onto his side to reveal a bloodstain along his lower back. I didn't know very much about the human body, but I knew something important had been pierced by the way Finley was shaking.

I took his face in my hands. "You stay awake, warrior. For your wife and daughter. For your king. Do you hear me?"

His eyelids fluttered, but he gave no response.

The king winced and gripped his side. When he removed his hands, they were stained red.

"You've been stabbed too?" I asked in horror.

"He must've grazed me with the dagger before I…" The king fell heavily against the bed's footboard.

I reached out to him but then looked down at Finley, torn. "Sire, listen to me. You're going to be fine. Dr. Ichiro is on his way."

"Y-Yes, of course," he said with an odd chuckle. "You must think me a weakling, becoming woozy at the sight of blood."

“Don’t be ashamed of your reaction, my lord,” I said, chuckling to hide my panic. “Blood belongs inside the body.”

Footsteps sounded in the hallway and then people piled into the room. I rose and turned to face them. Dagmar almost fainted at the sight of the three bodies. Then she saw me and let out a wail of horror.

“I’m fine!” I shouted so as to be heard. “It isn’t my blood. Viggo, would you please escort my handmaiden outside?” I waved Bryn over to Finley. “Could you—?”

Dagmar yanked her arm away before Viggo could touch her and glared at me. “No, I will not be *escorted* outside. Just look at this place! What happened? Where is the master?”

“I’m here,” Torvald said, peeking around me.

“Thank the heavens!” Her relief was short. “How did those hooligans get in here? Where are the guards?”

“One is here,” Bryn said, kneeling beside Finley. “And he’s badly wounded. He needs to be stitched up and stabilized immediately. Where’s Dr. Ichiro?”

The doctor hurried past Viggo and Dagmar. “I’m here. Not to worry.”

The two of us crouched before the Defender and the doctor-in-training.

Ichiro examined the wound, brow creased in concern. “This is not good, not good at all.” He turned. “Master Brynjar, would you help me carry Finley to the hospital? He needs to have surgery right away.”

“Is he going to be all right?” I asked as my friend hefted Finley over his shoulder.

Dr. Ichiro shook his head. “I don’t know, my lady.”

I bit my lip and glanced at Finley’s ashen face.

“Are you sure *you’re* all right?” Bryn asked.

I forced myself to look away from Finley. “Yes. I’m fine. Please, hurry.”

Bryn followed Ichiro out of the room, moving as fast as he dared with Finley over his shoulder.

“Asta,” the king said, voice wan. “Sh-Should I accompany the doctor?”

My stomach twisted in guilt. “Yes! Forgive me, sire.”

Dagmar let out a shriek. “*The master has been stabbed?*”

The two of us blessed by Dotharr winced in unison.

“Viggo,” I said, nodding insistently at my handmaiden.

He didn’t look too happy about it, but he wrapped both arms around Dagmar and dragged her, kicking and screaming, out of the room.

“No! I must see how seriously the master has been injured. Get

your hands off me! I will not be handled this way. I am not a child. Let go of me at *once*!" Slowly but steadily, her voice grew more faint.

The king rose and pushed himself off the bed frame. "I don't think I can…" He collapsed back against the wood.

I hurried to his side. "Lean on me, sire." Together, we walked to the hospital.

I threw the doors open and stormed out of the building.

"Asta," Viggo said, hurrying after me. "Wait."

"I said I was fine, Viggo! I just need to clean up."

He caught my wrist and spun me around. "Finley's death was not your fault."

"Not my *fault*?" My voice echoed across the ward, drawing the eyes of many. *I* was too angry to care. "*I* was supposed to be watching the king last night. I was supposed to be in that room when those assassins came. It was supposed to be *me* on that operating table!" My voice cracked. I ran a hand down the length of my face, wiping the tears and the crusted blood still clinging to my skin.

Viggo's jaw clenched but he said nothing.

"But it wasn't me. I was too busy weeping and sleeping to show up for my night shift. How am I to face his wife and daughter?"

"It's not your fault," Viggo insisted. "You couldn't have predicted the assassination attempt. You couldn't have saved Finley."

"Perhaps I could have!" I said, throwing my hands up.

My friend raised his voice to match mine. "We'll never know! You can't let it consume you."

I spun around and proceeded to stalk to the king's home.

He sighed and followed me. "Asta…"

"Leave me alone!" I shrieked, glaring over my shoulder at him.

"I can't unless I'm sure you're not going to do something rash."

"I'm not going to do anything but bathe." I took the steps two at a time and flung myself against the door. I blinked back tears as I trudged up to the washroom.

While standing under the hot water, I replayed the attack over and over again in my mind. Once I was done crying, something stuck out to me. I changed and fixed my hair, and then went back to the scene of the crime. It was still in shambles. Even the bodies hadn't been disturbed. I called one of the maids and had her gather the guards who stood in the ward. They could help clean up and deliver the bodies to the hospital. I approached the man who had attempted to strangle me to death and lifted his mask. The dead eyes staring back at me were the color of liquid copper.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Torvald was stitched up, given some medication, and put in isolation. Gabor, Hemming, and Lennart roamed the hallways and periodically came into his room to check up on him. Fortunately, the isolation was more out of paranoia than actual necessity. The king was expected to make a full recovery within a few weeks.

Dr. Ichiro arranged for the bodies of the gifted assassins to be quietly moved to the morgue for him to examine. He was one of five people who were told of the assassins' origins. Viggo, Bryn, and I thought it wise to keep this information a secret until we found out more about the conspirators.

Torvald disagreed. "We should make this public," he insisted. "We should interrogate the warriors on the island, their superiors, their trainers, their friends, and the retired among Dotharr's anointed. We need to send a message. The crown will not turn a blind eye to high treason."

"Our knowledge of this conspiracy could scare those involved into hiding or worse," Viggo argued from the stool by the king's bed. "The fact that they don't know we know will buy us precious time to figure out who they are and why they're trying to kill you, sire."

The king shook his head and leaned back into his pillows. "I won't suspect every Holgarian I come into contact with. I won't live in fear of my own staff."

Bryn ran a hand over his face and pushed off the wall. "This doesn't make any sense. The king is beloved by our people. Anyone who lives on the hill lives in comfort and plenty, even the servants and their families. Those of us with copper eyes are respected and financially secure. Dotharr's warriors have no reason to hold a grudge against His Highness, much less wish him dead."

"Is it possible that these aren't locals?" Torvald asked. "Isa isn't from Holger, after all."

Bryn shook his head. "Highly improbable. If there are gifted fighters discovering their abilities in other parts of the world, countries where General Halvar is invading, they will fight for their homeland or be forced to join the raiders. If Asta—" Blanching, he glanced at the king. "I mean, Isa."

"He knows everything," I said, waving away his discomfort.

"Right, well…" Bryn cleared his throat. "If Asta is proof of anything, aside from the fact that miracles are possible, it's that the general won't let any potential warriors for Holger slip by him."

"And what of the counselors?" I stopped my pacing to ask. "Why are they being targeted?"

“Do you think it’s related?” Viggo asked.

I threw my hands in the air in exasperation. “It has to be! We aren’t completely incompetent at our jobs. It always seemed ridiculous to me that, despite the hundreds of people inhabiting the hill, *no one* saw anything on the nights of those three murders. Now I understand why. It was one of our own warriors, more skilled in sneaking than the rest, killing people without leaving a trace.”

“Master Philo should be in this meeting,” Torvald said, shifting to a more comfortable position. “As the guard master, he would know more about the men guarding us than anyone else.”

“For all we know, he could be in on it,” Bryn muttered.

The king scowled at him. “Don’t say that. He’s been the guard master since my father’s reign. He’s watched me grow up. I’d like to think we’re friends.”

“At this point, we can’t trust anyone outside this room, Your Majesty,” Viggo said, wearily rubbing his eyes. “Aside from Dr. Ichiro, of course.”

“And the king’s family,” I hastily added. “Including Kalea.”

My friends raised their eyebrows at me. “Who?”

“My soon-to-be-betrothed,” the king said, drawing all eyes to himself again. “We must trust the other Defenders. And Dagmar. And Rakim. We can’t suspect Rakim. He’s like a second father to me.”

“I think we need to consider the possibility that one of the counselors is behind all of this.” Viggo spoke again before the king could argue. “You have no heir, Your Majesty, and I doubt our traditional, conservative people would allow Prince Raoul to take the throne if anything happened to you. According to our laws, the counselors would then be in charge of running the island until another ‘suitable’ king could be elected.”

“The counselors could always make up excuses to explain why anyone the people elected would be deemed unsuitable,” Bryn said with a thoughtful nod.

“This is outrageous,” Torvald exclaimed. “Before I was of ruling age, they did everything in their power to protect and provide for the people. They did an incredible job and still do. There is no malice in their hearts. There can’t be! I would’ve seen it before now and replaced them.”

I moved to stand by the king and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Calm yourself, my lord. You won’t heal if you’re stressed.” I lifted my eyes to my friends. “The timing is off. If the counselors that remained truly wanted to rule Holger, they would have made their move while Torvald was young, less admired, and more vulnerable.”

“You’re right,” Viggo grudgingly admitted.

“There is another person we haven’t considered who could be

behind all of this," Bryn said as if bracing himself for an attack. "General Halvar."

"What?" the king sputtered. "You can't be serious. He's across the sea."

"Even I have to admit it's a stretch," I murmured. "He's the one who brought me here to *protect* the king. He wouldn't have gone to such great lengths to have me trained for this job if he only planned on killing the king later."

"That *is* true…" Bryn sighed. "We're running out of suspects."

"We just need to find more," Viggo said determinedly. "Perhaps there's a way we can force the conspirators to tell us who their leader is."

"Let me guess," Bryn said. "It involves my truth serum."

Viggo grinned. "You were always so clever."

"How are we going to keep them from telling whoever is behind all of this what we're up to?" I asked.

Bryn snapped his fingers. "Brain fog."

"Are we supposed to know what that means?" Viggo asked.

"It's something I stumbled upon when I was…" He threw the king a quick and nervous glance. "Visiting Temple Island."

Torvald blinked in surprise. "You've been to Temple Island?"

"Only once," Bryn said somewhat sheepishly. "I was curious to see if any of the documents kept in Dotharr's monastery could prove why the Heavenly Master of Warriors chose me despite my desire to be a doctor."

"Those are sacred texts. How did you manage to…?" The king frowned. "I'm going to ignore the fact that you snuck onto holy ground and read sacred scriptures without the blessing of a warrior monk for the purpose of saving time."

"Thank you," Bryn said with a bow of his head. "While going over the sacred scrolls, I read about a draught the warrior monks stole from the worshipers of Ishem. This draught, when ingested, could not only put a person to sleep but also confuse their mind. It mixed up their memories, created illusions and strange dreams, and even caused a person to forget recent events. Dotharr's anointed often used this draught on enemy guards when infiltrating foreign structures."

"That's perfect for our purposes," Viggo said. "Do you remember how it was made?"

"I didn't have too much time to investigate," Bryn admitted. "Perhaps if I returned and looked through the texts again…"

The three of us faced the king, who wilted against his pillows.

"May Dotharr forgive us for infiltrating his holy monastery."

I scratched the bandage around my ear and winced. "It's for a noble cause. I'm sure he'll understand."

The king's brow furrowed. "So what? Brynjar will create these draughts and test them to make sure they work. Viggo will 'treat' the guards to mead spiked with truth serum and subtly interrogate them. Then Isa will ambush them on their way back to their quarters and force them to drink the draughts?"

"Well, yes," Bryn said.

Viggo shrugged. "Sounds like a plan to me."

"It has to be done quickly," I added. "We can't lose any more counselors, and I'd personally like to punish whoever sent those men into your room before they think sending more men would be a good idea."

"That leaves me with nothing to do…" Torvald sighed heavily and rubbed his temples. "Let another man be king! I'm tired of feeling so helpless."

"My lord," I said softly, "you successfully defended yourself today, against one of Dotharr's anointed no less. You are anything but helpless."

"So long as you stay calm, sire, everyone else on the hill will also," Bryn said with a faint smile. "In the meantime, we won't rest until we find out who on Holger is trying to kill you."

"Well, *I* have to rest tonight or I'll make myself sick," Viggo said. "But after tomorrow, yes, there will be no resting until these *hooligans* are apprehended."

I smiled. "Poor Dagmar. Did she hurt you very much when you dragged her out?"

"She threatened to kick me if I didn't release her, but by then I had reached the bottom story so I had no problems letting her go."

I shook my head. "I should go and reassure her. Sleep well, Your Majesty. I'll be back to check on you in an hour."

Torvald nodded, eyes dark with gloom and frustration.

"Good night, my lord," Bryn said with a bow.

"I'll write a letter to the warrior monks on your behalf," Torvald said, somewhat distractedly. "That way you won't have to sneak onto holy ground and risk being struck by lightning this time."

Bryn pursed his lips to keep from smiling. "Thank you, sire."

"Thank you for guarding me last night, Viggo," the king added. "When I suggested Lady Isa get a full night's rest, she looked about ready to hurt me. I'm glad someone can make her see reason every once in a while."

Pausing in the doorway, I scowled at him over my shoulder. "At least wait until I've left the building if you're going to talk about me."

The king winced at his mistake and smiled sheepishly. "My apologies."

I couldn't keep the scowl when it seemed his spirits had been

lifted. I was suddenly struck with relief by the mere fact that he was alive and well enough to be moody about the circumstances. Today had been another extremely close call.

Viggo bowed. “I’d be happy to work some of her nights in the future, my lord. We can break her resolve together.”

I rolled my eyes on my way out of the room, and almost bumped into Lennart in the hallway. Grabbing him by the throat, I threw him against the wall. “Eavesdropping again?” I growled into his calm, smug face. “I thought Hemming had you and Gabor patrolling the upper ward.”

“I thought I’d check in on you and the king,” the weasel said with a curled lip. “Forgive me if I don’t trust you to keep him safe after what happened this morning.”

I squeezed his throat, only seeing my friends exiting the king’s hospital room out of the corner of my eye. Viggo placed a hand on my shoulder. “Isa.”

“He’s heard too much,” I said. “Either you let me kill him or we’ll be forced to involve him in our plan.”

“Your plan to interrogate everyone on the island and hope you find the criminals before they decide to run?” Lennart laughed harshly. “I’d rather kiss Gabor.”

Bryn crossed his arms. “Do you have a better idea?”

“Yes. Set a trap, wait for them to strike, capture the assassins who come, and then question them with your truth serum.”

I seethed. “You mean put the king in more danger than he already is? Finley was murdered by these villains. It could be you or Hemming or Gabor who gets killed next.”

Lennart’s copper eyes gleamed with rage. “Getting revenge for Finley is as important if not more so than apprehending the king’s new enemies.” He pushed me back and straightened his wrinkled waistcoat. “Which is why we can’t afford to waste any time.”

I shook my head. “I respected Finley. I’m sorry he’s dead, but I won’t endanger the king. He is our main priority. You know Finley would agree,” I added when it appeared Lennart was going to argue. “Our plan is safer.”

“Your plan will fail. Think of another one.” Lennart threw Viggo an annoyed glance. “Did you ever get around to looking at the accounts of those cases the three murdered counselors were involved in?”

“No. There hasn’t been time.”

“You would be wise to make time. The scribes will allow you access into the room of records if you give them that excuse. Then you would be free to look into any archives you wish.”

Bryn raised his eyebrows. “You believe the counselors are

somehow involved with the traitorous Holgarians."

Lennart smirked. "You're new here so I'll indulge you. There are three authorities under the king on this hill: the counselors, the guard master, and the Defenders. Nothing happens here without one of those parties having knowledge of it. The king is only kept up to date on government matters and the well-being of his people for many reasons, the chief of them being that his constitution is much too delicate to stomach any talk of betrayal or grisly crime. It is highly improbable that all of the aforementioned authorities are completely oblivious to this league of traitors and their plan to kill the king."

I opened my mouth to demand why I hadn't been privy to this information sooner, but Lennart continued speaking before I could get a word in.

"Philo has worked here many years and has portrayed nothing but a fierce loyalty to the king. He's also a very private man and can use that to avoid suspicion." Lennart nodded at Viggo. "You're right not to want to tell him about the real culprits behind Finley's death. You should use your position as his assistant to gain as much information about him as possible. Hopefully, we'll be able to rule him out as a suspect soon." Lennart sighed. "I suppose Asta and I could find out what we can from the Defenders that remain. That leaves Master Brynjar to investigate the counselors. Perhaps by saying that he's helping his old academy friend with the investigation, he'll be able to gain access into the room of records."

"How do you know that name?" I asked, suddenly queasy.

"What name? Oh, you mean your true name?" Lennart smirked again. "I've heard it spoken by your friends in passing."

Viggo grabbed a fistful of Lennart's silk shirt and flung him back against the wall. "You would be wise to stop listening in on Lady Isa's conversations. A lady's business is her own. Remember that we're only trusting you because we must. One suspicious move and we won't hesitate to get rid of you."

Lennart had the gall to laugh. "You bunch are awfully fond of your threats."

Viggo threw a knee up into Lennart's groin. The Defender doubled over with a grunt and then was roughly tossed aside. "How's that for a threat?"

Lennart slouched away, grumbling curses.

Bryn touched my elbow. "Are you all right?"

"Not really." I peeked at Viggo. "You didn't have to—"

"Of course I did," he said gruffly. "That fellow's been bothering you since you set foot on this hill. Someone had to put an end to it."

"I'm not sure that was enough to dissuade him from bothering Asta," Bryn said. "He obviously has feelings for her."

I gasped. “What? No!”

Viggo scoffed. “All that mongrel is interested in is taking her virginity. Best be on your guard, Asta.”

I shuddered and wrapped my arms around myself. The all too familiar concoction of terror, shame, and wrongness was poured over the top of my head. I could feel it oozing down the length of my person, making my insides tremble and my skin turn cold. Viggo looked at me when I didn’t respond. I lowered my gaze.

“I-I have to go see Dagmar,” I murmured, then I fled.

I was surprised to find Haskell pacing outside the entrance to the hospital. He was dressed for dinner in his nice breeches and tailcoat, but his red curls were taller than I remembered. I wondered if perhaps he’d been running his hands through his hair recently.

“Prince Haskell.”

He jumped at the sound of his name. “Oh, g-good evening, Lady Isa.”

“What brings you to the hospital after dark? Dr. Ichiro isn’t letting the king see anyone until tomorrow.”

The little boy nodded. “Yes, I know. I was looking for Master Viggo.”

I peered at the guards keeping watch at the front door and lowered my voice. “Do you have information?”

Haskell squirmed. “No… Well, yes… I don’t know if it’s relevant to his investigation.”

I put my hands on my knees to look into his eyes. “He can decide that but, please, don’t do anymore spying. After the attack on the king’s home today, Master Viggo and I decided it’s just too dangerous for you to be snooping for us. You’ll still get that extra gold coin for your allowance, though. Thank you for being willing to help us.”

The young prince put his hands in his pockets and began to retreat. “You’re welcome.”

I straightened up. “Aren’t you going to talk to Master Viggo?”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

I stepped toward him. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, of course,” Haskell said with an uneasy smile. “Sorry to have wasted your time. Good night.” Then he sprinted across the upper ward and disappeared into the jade building.

PART III
TREASON

Chapter Twenty-Four

I smiled and clapped as Torvald danced with his new bride. Kalea was a vision in white satin and diamonds. The crown woven into her golden curls was made of glass, pearls, and misty white stones. Every eye seemed to be on her tonight. Her dress was off the shoulders and had the biggest skirt I'd ever seen, but somehow she danced with a carefree grace that astounded me. Kalea had that special ability, the one to amaze me. Kalea, Torvald's wife, the new queen of Holger. It happened mere hours ago and it was still hard to believe.

The square was adorned with white lace and big satin bows of bright pink. Bouquets of pale pink roses were attached to the lampposts, a string quartet played in the gazebo, and hundreds of tables were placed over the cobblestones for feasting. Every man, woman, and child who was able to attend had come. There was hardly any room to dance in the square, but the newlywed couple didn't seem bothered. For once, I wasn't made uncomfortable by the crowds. I was simply happy that the king was happy.

Bryn slid into place beside me with a glass of champagne. "Enjoying the party from afar, I see. Too afraid to join the gaiety?"

"Too tired," I retorted. "These past six weeks have been some of the busiest of my life. Between helping with the wedding planning, preparing for the island's anniversary celebration, and watching the royal couple around the clock, I'm surprised I'm still awake. My feet might fall off if I tried to dance."

"Dagmar will be upset when she hears you didn't have any fun," Bryn said, watching the dancing crowd over his glass.

"How would Dagmar know what fun is?" I chuckled. "Should you really be drinking that? I fear for my dress."

My handmaiden had insisted I wear a "real" dress tonight. I had been forced into a corset, two petticoats, a hoop skirt, stockings, and boots with heels. The midnight-blue dress cut across my chest in a low sweetheart neckline with puff sleeves. It was beautiful but impossible to move in. Dagmar reasoned I wouldn't catch my death with elbow-length gloves and a white fur shawl. The fact that my body registered temperature differently than the average woman's continued to slip her mind. My ears and neck had been adorned in silver and diamonds. Somehow Dagmar thought competing with the new queen's jewelry would be a good idea. I still chafed at the ridiculous necklace, but I kept it on because it was probably worth more than the king's crown.

Bryn's face reddened around his curly goatee. "I'm sipping the champagne slowly. It should take longer to affect me."

"Should," I said with a smile. "Best stay close to Viggo, just in

case. Where is he, anyway?"

He cast a look about the square. "Doing the rounds, like you asked him."

"I asked him to do the rounds almost two hours ago." I craned my neck to see above the heads of the people around me. "I hope nothing's happened to him."

"Why would anything happen to him?" Bryn said. "No one has died in weeks."

Which was true. Despite our best efforts to be discreet in our investigation, the conspirators must have gotten wind of our suspicions because no attempts had been made on the king's life, and no more counselors had been mysteriously disposed of since we began carrying out Lennart's plan. Hemming and Gabor had been acting perfectly normal. Lennart, unfortunately, was still a pill, but he hadn't done anything remotely suspicious since he began working with us. Master Philo, aside from continuing to fall ill at the most inconvenient times, was behaving as normally as ever.

The moment Bryn began looking through the counselor's files, scribes began reporting that some records were missing, presumed stolen. Upon questioning the other scribes and counselors, we learned that the break-in happened soon after the initiation of our investigation. Our enemies were clever and definitely had people working on the hill for them. So we resorted to our initial plan: subtly questioning the guards while they were under the influence of Bryn's truth serum.

It was a painstakingly slow procedure, one that we still weren't finished with. The lack of action and answers might have been enough to frustrate me to no end had Kalea not insisted I have a say in everything wedding related. And once my insights on fabric swatches and flowers had been made public, Torvald had roped me into helping with the decorations for the island's anniversary celebration. I was slowly turning back into a countrywoman. Thank the heavens Viggo volunteered to be my sparring partner. My skills were refreshed and my body was ready to spring into action if—and when—those traitorous Holgarians were on the move again.

"Keep your voice down," I told Bryn now, eyeing the group of men standing just to my right. "Someone might hear."

Viggo gripped my hand and leaned in to whisper in my ear. I knew it was Viggo because I heard his quick steps and smelled the subtle perfumes on his clothes before he had touched me. That and no one else dared touch me.

"Asta, he's here."

My blood ran cold. "The general? But I thought—"

"He was too busy to attend the king's wedding?" Viggo said. "Yes,

so he said, but I just saw him conversing with Counselor Rakim at the cake table. Apparently, he lied."

I laughed somewhat hysterically. "What a surprise."

Bryn leaned in to join our whispered conversation. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." I swallowed hard and nodded. "Yes, of course. It's only… I wasn't expecting to see him until after the winter and I had hoped Torvald's spies would have contacted us before then."

"Still no proof about the devastation overseas?" Viggo said with a scowl. "The king should send more spies with the general. The first group is probably tied to a pile of bricks at the bottom of the ocean."

"Does the king receive any mail from the mainland?" Bryn asked.

"Only letters from his diplomats and the mainland emissaries, which are delivered by General Halvar," I said. "The king has had those accounts tested against other documents written in those same representatives' handwriting. They match, so his ambassadors are alive. They must be being kept somewhere so that they can continue writing general-approved lies to Torvald. But, of course, there's no way to prove that."

Viggo's grip tightened around my fingers. "One of these days the general is going to make a mistake and when he does—"

I flinched. "One of these days I'll need my hand back."

He released me with a murmured apology.

Torvald and Kalea swept across the dance floor and came to sway directly before the three of us. Torvald looked sophisticated and refined in the black and white suit. The close-cropped beard and mustache made him seem much older and wiser somehow.

"If you're going to scare away all the potential suitors by standing so close to Lady Isa, the least you can do is ask her to dance, Viggo," Kalea said with a teasing smile.

Bryn chuckled at his friend's flabbergasted expression.

I snorted. "There are no potential suitors, Lady Queen. If anything, my fellow warriors are promoting a good image of me by pretending to be my suitors. Without them, I would be very much alone and pathetic."

"Is that so? Then why is there a group of eligible young bachelors mingling merely five paces away from you?" Kalea nodded at the men sipping champagne and trying to be inconspicuous.

I blushed because she was right. I had simply been too busy conspiring with my friends to realize it sooner. What happened to my fearsome and awe-inspiring reputation? Were men simply becoming more courageous? *It's the dress*, I reasoned. *It's much too revealing.*

"Come, my dear," Torvald said, gently leading his new bride away. "You're embarrassing our friend. Lady Isa is much too busy to

think of suitors."

"But there's more to life than keeping watch," Kalea protested. "I wasn't trying to embarrass her, just open her eyes to the possibilities."

"Yes, I know, dear. Perhaps some other time." The king sent me an apologetic smile before whisking his wife further into the dancing throng.

I mouthed, "Thank you," before they disappeared entirely from my sight. *If I'd known that getting married would inspire Kalea to marry off every other single lady she knows, I wouldn't have partaken in the celebration tonight…*

Bryn was trying to conceal his laughter and making funny noises in the process.

I elbowed him in the ribs. "So what exactly happened between you and Fia?"

"Will you ever let that matter go?" he asked with a frown.

"Not until you tell me."

Viggo placed a hand over the small of my back and ushered me forward. "Come, Asta."

"What are you doing?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"Asking you to dance." Viggo rolled his eyes. "What else?"

"But—"

His arm, now around my waist, pulled me close and silenced me. Bryn very helpfully lifted the fur shawl from my shoulders and skipped away before I could reprimand him. Viggo took my free hand and guided me through the steps. I couldn't remember the last time I'd danced. I looked down at my feet and then chanced a peek over my shoulder. If I made a fool of myself in front of those men, I would never regain my fearsome reputation.

"Eyes on me," Viggo said, surprisingly gentle.

I obeyed.

He smiled a peculiar little smile. "There. This isn't so bad, is it?"

I took a deep breath and tried to relax. "Not at all." Looking into his face, I realized he was the one part of my life that hadn't changed. He was still clean-shaven and handsome. Those burning eyes that made me wince whenever I saw them in a mirror looked warm and dear on his face. He was still gruff, straightforward, and brutally honest, but occasionally kind—to prove he wasn't completely heartless. I found myself smiling up at him.

"What is it?" he asked.

I leaned my head against his chest. "Promise me we'll always be together."

"Of course," he said, ears turning pink. He was slowly becoming more accustomed to my nearness. "Why wouldn't we be?"

"Much has changed since I arrived on Holger," I said. "It would

be nice if one thing stayed the same."

Viggo cleared his throat. "Asta—"

"May I cut in?"

Snapping to attention, I turned to see General Halvar standing beside us. I shuddered at the pink and red scars marring the left side of his face. His hair, beard, and mustache were neatly trimmed but with that face… he would always seem weathered, harsh, and odd. I'd forgotten how unnerving his mismatched stare could be.

I averted my gaze and stepped away from Viggo. "Sorry, sir. I suddenly don't feel well enough to dance."

The general clicked his tongue. "I sailed across the sea to attend this boring party. Can I at least be allowed a dance with the most beautiful woman present?"

"Don't mock me unless you want a scene," I said, glaring.

Halvar put a hand over his heart and had the audacity to look surprised. "I never mock, my lady. Please, do me the honor of dancing just one song with me."

Viggo made a sound that was eerily close to a growl. "The lady doesn't feel well, sir. Kindly refrain from hassling her."

General Halvar dropped the act in the blink of an eye. He looked down his nose at Viggo and smirked. "As you were, warrior. I don't have to ask for anything; it is a courtesy, really, that I even pretend to seek permission from a girl whose life I spared and continue to spare whenever we cross paths."

I placed a restraining hand on Viggo's shoulder and stepped between them. "I think you'll find that my influence has grown since last you visited, sir. I'm the Lady Warrior who keeps saving the king's life, and you're the savage brute who keeps insulting and demeaning his favorite Defender whenever you come to visit. Just whose side do you think he'll take if he thinks we're having an altercation?"

"I picked up a stupid, insolent mule from Kenshore, had her trained and educated in the best school, and persuaded the king to hire her." The general picked invisible lint particles from his creaseless black uniform. "And how has she repaid me? By resorting to insults and unseemly growling whenever I come to visit."

I dug my fingers into Viggo's shirt and locked my elbow into place, forcing him back. I couldn't let him jump to defend my honor and start a fight on the dance floor. Despite the anger sloshing around my chest and the heat rising up my neck, I refused to ruin the wedding reception.

The general sneered. "Let the record show that I tried to be cordial, and it was the Lady Warrior who refused to let bygones be bygones."

Releasing Viggo, I stood up to my full height. "How about I

murder your family and destroy your precious ship along with every man on board? Then we'll see how easily *you* let bygones be bygones."

Halvar chuckled. "Good gracious. Is that any way for a lady to address a gentleman?"

I trembled with the effort it took to refrain from punching him in the face. "If there was such a thing as a perfect gentleman, you are the creature that is farthest from it." I spun on my heel and began stalking away from him.

"Will you do me a favor?"

Despite the laughter, the music, the voices all around me, I could still hear his low murmur. Something took hold of my body and forced me to stop. Fear made my flesh crawl.

No… It's not possible. It was only a dream!

Slowly and against my will, I turned to face him.

He smiled and held his arms out. "Won't you embrace me?"

My mind screamed, "No!" and yet my feet took me back to him.

"Isa," Viggo said, aghast. "What are you doing?"

My mouth remained shut. I wanted to cry out for help. I wanted to tell Viggo how desperately I needed him to hit me and snap me out of this trance the general had put me in.

My arms wrapped around Halvar's neck. His arms came around my waist. I thought I was going to be sick. I hoped I would vomit across his shoulder. Perhaps that would make him step away from me. The smell of him… the smell of sea, grime, and an icy-cold wind stifled me. But I couldn't move. I was trapped in my own body, trapped in his arms. He leaned his cheek against the side of my head.

Tears poured down my face.

"Will you do me a favor?" the general whispered to me now. "Will you take this man to a secluded place and kill him for me?"

He pressed his lips against my forehead and released me. I met Viggo's eyes. The horror I saw on his face helped the bile finally come up and out. I lurched forward and emptied my stomach over the dance floor. Viggo blinked his shock away and came to take me by the shoulders.

"Oh, dear," General Halvar said with false sympathy. "It appears Lady Isa is incapable of holding her drink."

Viggo shot him a murderous glare before steering me away. "You're going to be all right, Asta."

No, we can't leave the shelter of the crowd! I wanted to say. *The moment we're alone I'm going to kill you! You have to shake me, yell at me, knock me unconscious… Something!*

I was escorted out of the square and down a more private street. I willed my heels to dig into the cobblestones. They continued to walk. I kept screaming at Viggo in my head. My mouth stayed shut. The

moment the sounds of the party were gone, I turned on him, striking him across the jaw.

My friend staggered back with a cry of surprise. He held his chin and gave me a wide-eyed stare. “What was that for?”

I tackled him to the ground. The fabric of his suit tore. The back of his head smacked against the stone and he grunted in pain. It didn’t matter. I proceeded to assault him with punches. He quickly lifted his arms to defend himself, shouting questions at me. When I didn’t answer him, he twisted his hips and threw me off. We both rolled and leapt to our feet. I drew the dagger that was hidden among my stockings and petticoat.

Viggo stiffened at the sight. I watched the wheels turning behind his eyes, watched him come to a decision. Hope blossomed in my chest. Perhaps he realized what was going on. Perhaps he would kill me and end this nightmare. I charged.

He whistled through his teeth and a horde of guards suddenly stood between us. I skidded to a halt, dagger poised.

My friend turned his gaze away from me as if he couldn’t bear to look at me for another second. “Lady Isa has been drugged. She’s not well. She must be taken back to the hill immediately.”

“It doesn’t look like she’ll be coming willingly, sir,” one guard murmured, eyeing my dagger.

“No,” Viggo said softly. “But we’ll take her to the hill nonetheless.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Amid the darkness, a torch was lit. I flinched and shut my eyes. My body already ached. Why did he have to burn my eyes now? Why did he have to add smoke to the smells of sweat, blood, urine, and vomit?

"Look at me," General Halvar commanded.

I peeled my eyes open. The light from the torch touched the general's horrible face. It was all I could see in this pitch-black room.

He stepped forward. "What is your name?"

My throat was so dry. I coughed, jarring my innards. My stomach no longer cried out in hunger. I suppose it had been empty for so long that it didn't remember it was supposed to be full. I licked my cracked lips. "Asta."

"Who are you?"

"I'm no one."

He came closer. "Correction: you were *no one. Now you are a servant of Dotharr." He frowned. "Say it."*

"I am a servant of Dotharr."

He paused a pace or so away from me. "Follow the light."

I whimpered. "It hurts."

"It will hurt more if you disobey," the general said. "Follow the light."

I watched the torch glide from side to side. I watched it until I could no longer see the general's face, until my eyes crossed and my head hurt.

"Will you do me a favor?" the general whispered. "Will you sing for me?"

* * *

I woke with a start. Bulky, heavy chains weighed my arms and feet down to the floor. I lifted my head with difficulty. It seemed to have its own pulse. Blinking hard and shaking my head did little to help clear my vision. I glimpsed stone walls and bars, and realized I was in a prison cell. There were new bruises and open wounds along every inch of my body. It ached. The dress Dagmar had forced me to wear was torn to shreds.

Unfortunately, I remembered everything. It made me tremble with anger and grief. *So it wasn't a nightmare. He really did find some way to control me…*

I heaved but nothing came out. Tears poured down my face. I had been right, that first day at the academy. I would never be free of General Halvar.

Viggo's glowing eyes pierced the semidarkness before me. He

leaned back against the wall across from my cell, arms crossed, face closed. But he was alive. I put my face in my hands and wept in earnest. Out of shame for what had happened or out of relief at seeing him in one piece, I didn't know.

"You've been keeping secrets from me." His simmering anger and disappointment were worse than a shouted accusation. "General Halvar has a greater hold on you than you ever let on."

"H-He tortured me," I sobbed. "He broke through my mental defenses somehow and… and twisted some part of me to do his will whenever he says—"

"Don't tell me," Viggo said, raising a hand. "I don't want to hold any power over you."

I crawled forward, desperate for his forgiveness. "I'm so sorry."

After an eternity it seemed, he spoke. "You weren't yourself."

"I could see it all happening, but I couldn't stop."

My friend's stiff shoulders and closed face had yet to relax.

"Did I hurt anyone?" I asked, gripping the bars between us. I'd never felt so far away from him.

"Only half of the guards I have at my disposal," Viggo said with a grunt. "But they'll live."

I shuddered. "What did you tell them?"

"That the Lady Warrior's drink had been spiked with an unknown toxin that made her paranoid and hostile. Bryn was there. He helped it sound convincing."

"But he knows the truth," I assumed. "Who else does?"

A door opened down the corridor and a somber Bryn joined us with his satchel a moment later. He glanced at me before addressing Viggo. "Is it safe?"

Viggo unlocked my cell by way of reply. Bryn stepped through and approached me like one would a feral beast. It hurt almost as much as the walls Viggo had built around himself.

"I'm going to dress your wounds," he said slowly. "Can you stand?"

It took effort to rise because of the chains, but I knew I couldn't complain.

"I'm going to need to remove the remains of your clothes."

I tried for a smile. It made my face hurt. "I know, Bryn. It's all right."

"I'll be just down the hall." Viggo locked the door and pocketed the keys. "Shout when you're ready to come out." He retreated before I could say anything.

Bryn put his satchel down on the floor, face wrinkled in concern. "What happened last night, Asta?"

"It was the general," I said miserably. "He can take control of my

body with a few simple words. I don't know how it works exactly, only that it involved days of pain and starvation and fire before it actually began taking affect."

Bryn sucked in a horrified breath. "Are none of us safe around you as long as he's near?"

My eyes stung with the coming of more tears. Would I never run out of those? I cleared my throat. "There is a phrase the general uses to break the trance and bring me back to myself. I don't know if it will work if someone else says it but…"

"What's the phrase?"

"That will be all, Asta."

He ran a hand over his face. "The atrocities this man has committed…"

"Does the king know about last night?" I dared ask.

"He hasn't been disturbed and won't be until the end of this week," Bryn said.

"When does General Halvar leave?"

"There is a counselor meeting at the end of this week that he's most likely going to attend." Bryn approached me and began loosening the laces of my dress. "They're going to discuss the replacement of the counselors who have been murdered. It can only be assumed that he'll be leaving shortly after. Lennart, Hemming, and Gabor will have to be without you until then."

I gritted my teeth in frustration, hating the idea of hiding. But I had no choice after last night.

"The king should eventually be told," Bryn said. "Perhaps it will persuade him to abandon his search for proof and simply incarcerate the general once and for all."

"What if Halvar somehow weaseled his way out of it? What if the counselors questioned the king? What if the king's sudden opposition to the Quest for Resources led to a debate that lasted long enough for the general to escape?" I shook my head. "We can't act against him yet. His influence is too strong. Torvald is right to continue seeking proof."

"Yes, I suppose," Bryn grumbled.

The dress cascaded to the floor. The hoop skirt and the corset came next. For the second time since I'd met Bryn, I stood before him in nothing but my undergarments. If Dagmar knew, she'd have him castrated. My heart sank with dread at the thought of my handmaiden. "What are we going to tell Dagmar?"

Bryn crouched to search through his satchel. "We could tell her you're having a particularly heavy bleeding and need to stay in bed this week."

"She wouldn't believe that," I said with a sigh. "I had my monthly

bleeding two weeks ago."

He retrieved the medicines he needed and a rag, and stood. "Perhaps we could tell her you've been harboring feelings for the king this whole time and seeing him happily married is too painful."

I snorted. "She would simply tell me to forget about my feelings and remember my job."

"Hmm…" Bryn soaked the rag in two medicines and began patting my exposed wounds. "Well, the guards are under the impression that you ingested a harmful toxin last night. Perhaps we can tell Dagmar that you've fallen ill because of it."

The medicine stung but I was prepared for it. "That'll have to do. I'll need your help convincing her."

Bryn scoffed. "I think I'll only hinder your efforts. You're better off playing the part of the sick girl all on your own."

I grudgingly agreed. "We'll have to burn this dress. She'll know something else happened last night if she ever sees it. Could you somehow sneak into my room and bring me another dress?"

"I'll ask Hemming to do that. For whatever reason, Dagmar trusts the Defenders more than she trusts your friends." Bryn rolled his eyes. "I suppose it's because she thinks one of us is going to steal your virtue."

My stomach turned. This mind trick of General Halvar's proved that any of my nightmares could've actually happened, not just the ones I could remember as facts. "I'm not so sure I have any virtue left to steal."

The hand with the rag paused before it could touch the wound along my shoulder. I regretted speaking. I didn't know where to look so I stared down at my exposed toes. A door was thrown open down the hall and quick footsteps were heard leaving the dungeon.

Bryn dropped his rag and ran to the bars. "Viggo, don't!"

All we heard was the door swinging shut with a *bang*.

I found it very hard to breathe all of a sudden. "What will he do?"

"Are there any guards down here?" Bryn swore and gripped the bars. "Can anyone hear me? It's Brynjar! Please, come let me out of this cell!"

"Bryn," I said sharply. "What do you think Viggo will do?"

"He was devastated enough after you attacked him last night. This new knowledge could very well send him over the edge." Bryn raised his voice again. "Hello! Is anyone there?"

"I'm here, Master Brynjar," came a faint voice. Soon footsteps and a guard followed.

My friend smiled in relief. "Thank the Heavenly Masters. Do you have the keys to this cell?"

The guard cast a wary glance my way. "Is it safe?"

“Yes, yes, she’s doing much better now. Please, let me out. I’ve just remembered I have an important errand I need to run right this minute.”

“Bryn, let me come with you,” I said, walking as far as the chains would let me. “I can help.”

The guard unlocked the door and Bryn hurried out. “You’re not properly dressed and there’s no time to waste. I’m sorry.” He turned to the guard. “Contact Defender Hemming and have him bring some clothes for Lady Isa. And be discreet.”

“Yes, sir.”

Then Bryn dashed out of the dungeon.

Hemming held a key and a bundled up dress while staring fixedly at the floor. I snatched the key from him first. Once my wrists were free of the shackles, I bent down over my ankles.

“Lady Isa, are you sure you’re well?” he asked, still averting his eyes.

I relieved him of the dress. “Yes, the toxin has worn off.” I wrapped the skirts around my waist and tied the laces. “Master Brynjar was in here a little bit ago and pronounced me healed.”

“Why are you in such a hurry to leave?”

“Would you want to stay here a moment longer than necessary?” I asked in exasperation. “It’s cold and dreary. Besides, I’m tired of being treated like a threat. I must show the guards that they have no reason to fear me anymore.” I wriggled into the dress bodice. “Thank you for bringing me some clothes. Please, tell Lennart and Gabor that I’m feeling better.”

“Of course.”

I began pulling the hairpins out of my hair as I walked out of the cell. “Good day!” I dashed down the hall and up the steps, emerging behind the glass building on the upper ward.

I squinted against the sun, suddenly too bright to my sensitive eyes. I didn’t know where to go at first. If Viggo was angry enough, he might have gone to find the general. But if Bryn managed to stop him before he attacked Halvar, perhaps Bryn could have persuaded our friend to take a walk or return to his living quarters. I would be no good to my friends if they were in the middle of an altercation with General Halvar. He would turn me against them in a second and we would have a repeat of last night. I took a deep breath and began trekking to the lower ward. It was midafternoon. Most, if not all, of the morning chores were finished by now. There were very few servants dashing about on the grounds. I assumed most were busy serving lunch to the counselors and royal family. It didn’t really matter; I was glad for the lack of personnel.

I braided my hair, twisted it into a bun, and secured it in place with the pins. I caught my reflection in the spring and grimaced. My makeup had been ruined by tears. I sank my cupped hands into the natural little lake and splashed water against my face. It took a moment of vigorous rubbing before the makeup smears were gone. Then I removed the jewelry and stuffed it into my pockets. At least now I looked semi presentable. No one would think me odd or disturbing if they encountered me.

I tried to act as if I was on a leisurely stroll but it wasn't easy. I kept picturing Viggo in fierce combat with the man who had destroyed my life. My friend was skilled but Halvar was more so, and ruthless at that. Viggo's chances of defeating such an opponent were not good, even if his righteous fury was fueling every blow. I cast a look around the ward before sprinting down the steps. Before I could reach the guards' living quarters, I caught sight of two men arguing in the training grounds.

Viggo's voice rumbled; it was his on-the-verge-of-shouting voice. I leapt over the rope fence and ran to my friends. They must've seen me coming because they stopped talking when I was within hearing range.

I skidded to a halt in their midst, kicking up dust. "Did you confront the general?"

"As if I would be so foolish," he grumbled.

Bryn gave his friend a chastising look. "You were pacing at the entrance to the jade building by the time I caught up to you. You were very close to being that foolish."

"Thank the heavens," I said, exhaling in relief. "Honestly, Viggo, if you used your head more often—"

"I defend my friends and do what I believe is right no matter the consequences," Viggo snapped, lamp-like eyes flashing at me. "I won't be reprimanded for that."

I dipped my head. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Viggo scowled at something in the distance.

My face burned. "I'm sorry about what you heard. I don't know why I said that. I'm not entirely sure what was done to me by the general. So much of it has been repressed…"

"You don't have to tell me *everything*," Viggo said gruffly. "I just wasn't expecting to learn so much, so soon."

Bryn looked from one friend to another before letting out an irritated sigh. "The two of you obviously need to talk, so I'm going to my room."

"If you value our friendship, Behnam," Viggo practically snarled, "you'll stay where you are."

"If you value yourself at all, *Alby*, you'll stop being a coward and

tell Asta the truth," Bryn countered.

Viggo's jaw clenched, nostrils flaring.

I choked on a laugh. "Alby?" Then it dawned on me. "That's your true name, isn't it? What does it mean?"

"White One. You see, he was rather pale as a child," Bryn said grumpily. "Why do you think he so loves to work in the sun?"

Viggo charged. Bryn planted his feet upon the ground and raised his fists, grim-faced.

I leapt between them and slammed my palms against Viggo's chest. "What is the matter with you? What truth is he talking about?"

He flailed back but quickly regained his balance. "He speaks of matters that aren't his business!"

Bryn abandoned his fighting stance. "You're my brother! You *are* my business!"

Viggo was ready to charge again but one furious look from me made him pause.

"Enough. I demand to know what's going on here."

The anger seeped out of Viggo all at once. His shoulders slumped and his head bowed as if he were so tired he could hardly stand. "I'm in love with you, Asta."

My mouth fell open but no words came. I let out a strange, choking sound and finally my voice broke through. "How? Why? Since when?"

My friend rubbed the back of his neck and frowned down at his feet. "Not sure how, too many reasons why, since the academy."

I let out a shaky laugh. "Too many reasons…?" Leveling an incredulous look at Bryn, I squeaked, "And you knew? This whole time?"

He scoffed, a half-hearted sound. "I knew before he did."

"This wasn't your secret to share, Bryn," Viggo said, red-faced.

"Enough!" I said shrilly.

My friends glanced at me, brows and mouths puckered in concern.

"I-I need to sit down," I said, stepping back.

Viggo nodded at the benches stretched out along the rope fence. I shuffled over to them and sat. I suddenly understood why Viggo had been unable to meet my eyes this whole time. I found it hard to look at him now.

"I'll leave you to it then," Bryn murmured, shoving his hands into his pockets.

A part of me wanted to force him to stay. It was his fault things had turned awkward between us. He should suffer just as much as Viggo and I were. But I couldn't seem to find the words. I just stared at his back, watched him become smaller and smaller until he entered

the guards' living quarters and was gone.

"I suppose it makes sense now," I told the dirt at our feet, the sky above us, the air we were breathing. "Why it was so hard for you to hear of what's happened to me."

"Why the knowledge of your suffering and brokenness breaks me?"

I'd never heard his voice sound so small. My heart ached. I shut my eyes. "Viggo, I'm so sorry."

The silence that followed seemed to stretch on forever.

"Have you nothing else to say to me?" he asked.

At last, I mustered the strength to look at him. His face was closed again, his sharp eyes staring at something I couldn't see, his body tense as if waiting to be struck. Waiting to be hurt.

The breeze tugged at his shirt. As usual, the first few buttons were undone, exposing the hollow of his throat. From this angle and with the help of the wind, I could see his collarbone. I'd grappled with him numerous times in the last few weeks. I knew his body as well as I knew mine. And yet, I was transfixed by this exposed patch of skin. For the first time since I'd met him, I allowed myself to truly look at him. He was my best friend but he was also a man, the strongest, most loyal, and selfless man I'd ever known.

I rose from the bench and reached out to take him in my arms. He carefully returned my embrace. I pressed my body into his, and burrowed my face into his neck. There was the familiar warmth radiating off his skin and sinking into mine. There was the familiar scent of sweat and whatever soap the servants used to wash his clothes. There was the feeling of complete and utter security. Of home.

"Asta?" he whispered.

I drew back and kissed him. He released my waist to take my face in his hands. His calloused, beautiful hands. He kissed me as if he'd never get the chance to do so again.

I was smiling when he released me. "You are *so* loved, Alby, son of Padraig."

Viggo shut his eyes tightly. "I am going to kill Bryn."

Chapter Twenty-Six

After three days of pretending to be sick, I was itching to move. Hemming had been nice enough to stop by my rooms and report to me the goings-on of the hill, but there was very little to report. Lennart occasionally dropped in to tell me of Hemming and Gabor's movements after their shifts, but he had yet to verify whether they were working for the traitorous Holgarians or not. Dagmar was quick to shoo away my visitors and eager to force-feed me the disgusting medicines Bryn brought by.

Viggo was banned from seeing me. For whatever reason, Dagmar was convinced it was his fault I had ingested the harmful toxin that had caused me to go insane, so it was his fault that I had fallen ill. I begged her to let him come in the first two times he knocked on my door, but my handmaiden was most insistent. She took the flowers he brought and slammed the door in his face. I sulked and smelled my flowers until I couldn't take it anymore.

"I'm feeling much better, Dagmar," I said on the morning of the fourth day. "Can't I go outside? I'm so tired of this room."

Dagmar placed a hand over my stomach, as if she could feel the imaginary ailment through my clothes. "Let's wait until this evening to be sure it's passed. It would be a shame for the royal family to witness you vomiting."

And so I waited. Instead of faking a loss of appetite, I scarfed down every meal she brought me. Instead of curling up and groaning as if I had a stomachache, I sat up and read the books she provided. When evening came, she was convinced I was better.

"Thank you so much for taking care of me," I said, climbing out of bed at last.

"What do you plan on doing with your last evening off?" Dagmar asked somewhat suspiciously.

I hurried to the closet to change out of my nightshirt. "I intend to see the only friend you haven't allowed me to see since I became sick."

Dagmar frowned. "He can't be trusted."

"So far, the only person on this hill that has been attacked is the king," I reminded her as I looked through my clothes. "Viggo had no reason to suspect I was in danger. I myself didn't think to check my drink before tasting it. It was no one's fault."

"Fine," Dagmar said with a huff. "See the scoundrel if you must, but I'm going with you."

I was thrown on my back with an 'oof!' A cloud of dust floated up

around me, making my nose twitch. Viggo pounced like a predatory cat upon its prey and threw a volley of punches at my face. I caught one of his wrists and twisted my hips, throwing him off balance. He hit the ground and rolled. I sprang to my feet, fists at the ready. Viggo coughed and spat dirt before rising. He wiped his slick, stained face with his shoulder before adopting a similar defensive stance. We regarded each other, panting, weary. I lowered my fists. Viggo raised his eyebrows in a silent question. I gestured to the benches stationed along the edges of the training grounds, too tired to explain. Fortunately, he understood and followed me.

How I'd missed sparring with him! He had been a little hesitant when I showed up at his door with Dagmar in tow. It had only taken a few minutes into our grappling match for him to return to his old self, however.

Dagmar looked up from her knitting and stiffly set the half finished baby blanket aside. "Have you finished beating each other senseless?"

I wordlessly lifted the pitcher sitting beside her and poured water into the waiting glass. I handed the glass to Viggo, who accepted it with a hoarse "Thank you," and began guzzling it down.

"You both look like you've been rolling around with the dogs," my handmaiden said with a sniff. "Why you insist upon wrestling like animals is beyond me."

"We have to keep our skills and senses sharp or we'll begin to lose them," I rasped. "You didn't have to watch."

"Someone has to keep an eye on that boy," my handmaiden murmured, squinting at my friend.

I shook my head while pouring myself a glass of water. "If he wanted to kill me, he would have done it in warrior academy, when I successfully infiltrated the wooden gatehouse and keep he was in charge of defending."

"We lost by one man!" Viggo exclaimed. "It was barely a victory."

"But a victory nonetheless," I said, smiling over my glass.

He waved away my comment and poured himself more water.

I turned to Dagmar. "Honestly, I'm safer in his company than anyone else's. Please, for me, will you get some sleep? Heaven knows what time it is and chances are you'll be awake before anyone else is to tend to me in the morning."

Dagmar gathered her knitting supplies. "Yes, all right. But if you're not in bed within the hour, there will be consequences."

"If you know I'm not in bed within the hour, Mother dearest, then you won't be sleeping." I shooed her away. "Goodnight and rest well."

She trudged off, grumbling about 'ungrateful' children and 'barbaric' practices. Viggo and I shared a smile before settling onto the

abandoned bench. We would look fearsome to anyone passing by with our disheveled hair, our white shirts turned brown with sweat and dirt, torn trousers, and dirty feet. Viggo was sporting a black eye and I had scrapes across my back where his nails had dug in. They stung and bled a little at first, but were dry and numb now. I leaned back against the rope fence with a sigh, exhausted but content.

"Do you think Bryn's still awake?" I asked.

Viggo shrugged. "It isn't uncommon for him to stay up all night studying, but he still has a lot of food to test in the morning. Perhaps he allowed himself a few hours' rest."

I grinned. "Then we shouldn't disturb him for a midnight pint."

"I don't think he'll be too put out if we drink without him, but the pub is closed."

I wove my fingers through my hair and extracted several pins. "Not for long."

Viggo leaned against the wall and watched me work, mouth twisting in amusement. "Well, it's a comfort to know you don't excel at *everything*."

I carefully jiggled the hairpin. "This requires too much concentration for a clever retort."

"Give it up, Asta," Viggo said, chuckling. "You've been fiddling with that knob for hours. Let me try."

"No," I said slowly, still focused on the doorknob, "because I've pushed most of the pins within the lock, and I know the moment I give up, you'll manage to push the last one into place and claim the victory."

"This isn't a competition. I'd like to have a drink before the sun rises." He knelt beside me and elbowed me in the ribs. "Stop being stubborn and move over."

I bit the air between us, snapping my teeth together with an audible crack.

Viggo blinked at me. "That was ladylike."

Scowling at the doorknob, I continued jiggling.

"You're gripping the bottom pin too hard. Relax it a little. Here." He reached for my hands.

I could grapple with him in the dirt, struggle against his grip for hours, but the moment his fingers brushed the back of my hands in such a casual and intimate manner, I lost the will to oppose him. I moved aside with a defeated sigh. I watched his agile fingers work the hairpins until the lock clicked and the door was open. Viggo let out a triumphant "Ha!" and jumped to his feet.

I scrambled after him. "I did most of the work for you!"

Viggo sauntered across the room, hopped over the counter, and

crouched before the bottles stacked there. “Ahh, mead, my old friend. I was afraid I’d never see you again.”

“It didn’t take *that* long,” I murmured.

“I could feel the hair on my face growing.” He selected a bottle and went hunting for clean tankards. “I had half a mind to run to my quarters for a shave.”

I fell into a booth with a snort. “Why do you fear facial hair so?”

Viggo found what he was looking for and came to join me. “I don’t fear it. I simply can’t grow it properly.”

“Poor Viggo,” I said with a laugh.

He tugged the cap off of the bottle. “Don’t pity me. I’ve heard beards itch like mad. I’m glad I don’t have to bother with one.”

“But the beard and mustache make Torvald look so… prestigious, and Bryn looks quite grown up with his goatee.”

Viggo poured the mead and settled in beside me. “Well, good for them. I still don’t want either.”

I laughed again before drinking. We brushed shoulders. He choked on his mead and settled his tankard over the table, bending forward slightly to cough.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine,” he croaked. He coughed some more, wiped a forearm across his mouth.

“Is it strange for you too?” I asked, face warm. “Touching?”

He turned slightly to give me a relieved smile. “It is. I know it shouldn’t be. Nothing’s changed between us, but…”

“Everything’s changed,” I said softly.

Viggo nodded.

I lowered my tankard onto the table and reached for his hand. It was thick, sturdy, with a fine patch of blond hair on the back. He stiffened in surprise but I hardly noticed. I ran my fingers over his palm, in awe at the realization that this was acceptable now when it would have been considered ‘improper’ just days ago. I lifted his arm up and over my head. It settled comfortably over my shoulders. He didn’t relax until I’d taken my tankard again and leaned into his side.

“Should we check on the king and queen before retiring?” Viggo asked after a time.

I shook my head. “Gabor and Lennart are patrolling the house tonight. Besides, a bell was built into the balcony connected to their room. If an assassin sneaks in and attacks them, they can ring the bell and everyone on the hill will come running.”

“I pity them,” Viggo murmured.

“I don’t,” I said with a snort. “They’re on their honeymoon.”

Viggo wrinkled his nose. “Yes, I’m sure honeymooning at home with guards pressing their ears against the windows is every

newlywed's dream."

"I suppose that would make things slightly less romantic," I said, lips quirking in amusement, "but what were they supposed to do? Traveling during the Quest for Resources is hardly safe. The king and queen are wise to wait for a real honeymoon."

"I'm glad I was born into an average family. Being important is so stressful and invasive," Viggo said.

"Do our lives seem stress free and private to you?" I asked.

Viggo cracked a smile. "No, I suppose not, but we have it better than they do."

"I can't argue with that."

He looked down at his tankard, suddenly somber. "My sister is having a baby."

"The sister who is married to the baker or the sister still living at home?" I dared ask.

"Fallon is fifteen. If she were pregnant, I would be out hunting down the bastard who dared to bed her. It's Bara who's with child."

"Well, then, that's wonderful news. Why do you seem so forlorn?"

Viggo shifted in his seat. "I'm not forlorn. It's just… Now that Bara is going to be a parent, she's convinced I should be a parent and is wondering why I haven't married and begun procreating yet."

I made a sound at the back of my throat, half exasperated, half incredulous. "Honestly, Viggo, you're only twenty-four. You have plenty of time for marriage and children."

Viggo nodded uncomfortably. "Yes, yes, you're right. I shouldn't let my sister's words affect me. But now that we're on the subject…" He carefully rotated his tankard and watched his drink spin, ears pink. "Do you ever think about it? Marriage and children and whatnot?"

"I was engaged once," I found myself admitting.

He released the tankard, which settled onto the table top with a *clap*. "What?"

"In Kenshore, before General Halvar and his barbarians attacked, I was promised to Kustaav. He was a retired soldier."

Viggo's face scrunched up in disgust. "How old was he?"

"Thirty. He only retired because he was injured in battle, and after he recovered from that he returned to school. He was kind and smart. It was a good match."

Viggo took back the arm that had been around me as if it had been burned. "Why am I only learning this now?"

"Because it didn't seem important."

"Did you love him?" Viggo demanded.

"No," I said, a little hurt by his tone. "In fact, I thought he was too proper and reserved. I found his lack of affection stifling. I almost slept with the stable boy because I thought that would be the only

way to experience some passion before I was married. Kustaav joined the other men in defending our town and was killed before I could apologize to him."

Viggo flinched. "Asta, I'm—"

"If I speak well of him, it's only because I regret the way I treated him when he was alive and I wish to honor him now that he's gone."

"I'm sorry," he muttered down at his tankard.

I nodded, accepting his apology. We drank in silence.

"It shouldn't have bothered me," he said softly. "I had feelings for another girl, when I was younger. You and I didn't know each other then." He rolled his shoulders. "It doesn't matter."

"It was the thought of me marrying someone else that upset you," I said. "I understand."

He exhaled. "I'm glad. So, I heard something interesting from the last servant girl I interrogated."

"Oh?" I said, eager for a change in topic.

"I don't know how it relates to the dead counselors or the Holgarian warriors plotting against the king, but it's definitely worth sharing."

"All right, you've piqued my curiosity," I said, placing my empty tankard on the table.

Viggo grinned. "Lady Helka is entertaining guards in her quarters."

"No!"

"Yes. See? I told you it was interesting."

"Are you sure? She claims to have only ever loved one man and that was King Tatsuo."

"Unfortunately, one doesn't need to be in love to have suitors. Once I'd finished questioning that servant girl, I interrogated the other servants who work on Lady Helka's floor in the jade building," Viggo said. "Five others confirmed seeing guards being invited into Lady Helka's rooms at odd hours of the night."

"She's always seems so… composed and proper. I can't imagine her sharing her bed with many different men. And she has small children!" I said, suddenly queasy. "No wonder Princess Evie and Prince Haskell like to draw so much attention to themselves. How else can they get the attention of their wayward mother?"

"It's the talk of her floor. Apparently, this has been going on for months."

I shook my head, still unable to fully believe. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?" Viggo asked.

"Well, something terrible must've happened to drive her to seek the company of so many men. A woman who has only ever loved one man doesn't simply wake up one morning and decide she wants to

experiment with others."

Viggo grimaced. "Now we're encroaching on uncomfortable territory."

"Perhaps that's what Prince Haskell wanted to talk to you about that day," I murmured.

"What day?"

"After the most recent attack on the king, Prince Haskell approached me outside the hospital. He said he wanted to speak to you about something but then he changed his mind and ran back home. It was strange, but I didn't think anything of it. Now I'm wondering if maybe he wanted your help in confronting his mother about these men. You *are* the assistant guard master."

"Assistant *to* the guard master," Viggo corrected.

I rolled my eyes. "In any event, I should try to ask the young prince about it, shouldn't I? Maybe he's as uncomfortable about his mother's habits as you are."

"We don't want to embarrass Lady Helka with an intervention," Viggo said. "Besides, it's not really our place to tell her what she should and shouldn't do within her own walls."

"Yes, but if Prince Haskell knows then it's only a matter of time before Princess Evie finds out and that's just wrong," I said with a shudder. "She's so young and innocent."

"How about this? We'll only intervene if Prince Haskell approaches one of us and confides in us. Until then, we'll pretend to know nothing about it. I'll scold the servants for gossiping and make them swear not to spread the word about Lady Helka."

I agreed but wasn't entirely happy about our solution. I felt strongly for the young prince and princess, was convinced Lady Helka deserved a good scolding and a little humiliation for being such a poor example to her children. Hopefully, Haskell would find the courage to approach me again and, this time, follow through with his confession.

"Dagmar doesn't know about us, does she?" Viggo asked, drawing me out of my thoughts.

I chuckled. "No, I'd like you to live."

"Does anyone else know?"

"Bryn. Why do you ask?"

He shrugged. "My sisters always gushed about their beaus to anyone who would listen. I assumed it was something all women did."

I blinked at him. "You think I'm ashamed of you."

Viggo scoffed and averted his gaze. A sign, I'd come to realize, that the next few words out of his mouth would be evasive or dishonest. "You're being absurd."

"Am I?" I asked, grinning at his discomfort.

"I was just curious to see if you wanted to—"

Voices outside the pub made him pause. We grabbed our tankards and ducked under the table just as the door was opened.

“Strange. They must have forgotten to lock up,” a familiar female voice said.

“They never forget to lock up,” Lennart said. “Perhaps we should adjourn to your quarters tonight.”

Viggo and I shared a quizzical look.

“We were there the night before last. Are you sure we can’t snag a bottle of wine?” the woman simpered.

“I have some in my quarters. We’ll retire there.”

“Oh, all right, but only for a few hours. I need to return to the children.”

My eyes widened. Viggo nodded and mouthed, “Helka,” to confirm my suspicions. The two lovers retreated and shut the door behind them. Viggo and I remained under our table until we could no longer hear them murmuring to each other. I scrambled out into the open and jumped to my feet.

“That lying bastard! He said he was going to be guarding the king’s home with Gabor tonight.”

“Which means the king and queen are alone with one of our suspects,” Viggo said, crawling out beside me. “That can’t bode well.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Viggo and I raced up to the steps of the king's house, only to stop short. Gabor exited the house and shut the door behind him, stifling a yawn. He scowled when he caught sight of us. "Can I help you?"

"No, thank you." I ducked around him and went inside with Viggo close behind.

Most of the staff had been dismissed after the king had been poisoned. I still wasn't accustomed to the house being so quiet at night. Viggo and I snuck around, looking for anything suspicious. I even looked in on the royal couple, although I strained my ears to make sure they were asleep before I entered their room. Everything seemed to be in order. I let out a sigh of relief and joined Viggo downstairs.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," I reported.

"That's not too surprising. If Gabor really was our traitor, it wouldn't be smart for him to strike the king when he's the only one on duty," Viggo said.

"Yes, but Gabor has never been very bright."

Viggo grinned at me through the semidarkness. "Don't confuse stupidity for insecurity. Chances are his manhood is much smaller than he'd like it to be."

I stifled a laugh. "Is that all it takes to make a man unbearable to be around?"

"So I've been told." Viggo frowned. "I'm starting to think Lennart is the true suspect here. Why would he risk the king's safety by leaving Gabor alone?"

"Either he knows Gabor isn't our traitor, or he doesn't care what happens to the king," I said. "I don't think it matters. It still makes him untrustworthy. I wish there was some way to interrogate him with truth serum."

Viggo ran a hand over his face. "Short of ambushing him and strapping him with irons, I don't think we'll be able to get any serum in him. He knows better than to drink anything we offer."

"We'll have to think of something else," I said, determined. "We've let him have his way long enough."

Viggo nodded absently. "I suppose I should let you sleep now."

"After this, I'll be lucky if I'm able to close my eyes tonight," I said grumpily. "You should have let me kill Lennart when I had the chance."

Viggo smiled slightly and brushed my cheek with his knuckles. "It would have brought you no comfort."

I frowned despite my dancing innards. "How do you know?"

“I know you.” He cupped my chin and kissed me then, sending sparks flaring down the length of my body. I leaned into him, his arms tightened around me, and—

“What is going on down there?”

We jumped apart and I spun around to see Dagmar marching down the stairs in her night robe. Her gray hair was wild from sleep, her dark eyes wilder still.

“Viggo was just—”

“Attaching his filthy mouth to that of a woman who isn’t his wife?” my handmaiden screeched.

“Dagmar!” I said. “Please.”

“This is outrageous! I knew I couldn’t leave him alone with you. There was just something about him I didn’t like.” She charged at us, took me by the arm, and attempted to yank me away. All she succeeded in doing was raking her nails across my skin.

I grimaced but held my ground. Dagmar blinked in surprise before grabbing my arm and trying again.

“I’m *not* a child,” I said through my teeth. “I’m fully capable of making my own decisions. I will *not* allow you to continue treating my friends like untrustworthy *hooligans* when they have done nothing to earn your hatred. Now, kindly remove your hand before you scratch me again!”

My handmaiden released me and stepped back, mouth hanging open. “How dare you?”

Some of my anger dissipated at the hurt in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Dagmar. I appreciate your concern, but you’re not my mother. We have to set some boundaries.”

She pointed accusingly at Viggo, who ducked behind me. “Have you set boundaries with *him*?”

“It’s only just happened,” I said with a huff. “We haven’t had time to discuss the parameters of our relationship.”

Dagmar crossed her arms with her trademark *hmmph*. “Well, he has to marry you now. Your virgin lips have been forever spoiled.”

“He’s not the only man I’ve kissed!” I sputtered indignantly. “And whether we marry or not is entirely between Viggo and I.”

The old woman set her jaw stubbornly. “Fine. The two of you *adults* can discuss this further in the morning. You are supposed to be in bed. Come.” She spun on her heel and retreated up the stairs without waiting to see if I’d follow.

“Thank you for stepping in and defending us,” I hissed, twisting around to give Viggo a harsh look.

“It looked as if you had it under control,” he said with an innocent shrug. “So… how many other men have you kissed?”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

He raised his hands, palms forward in surrender. “I’m sorry. I was merely curious.” Despite his best efforts to appear contrite, a smile played around the corners of his mouth.

I sighed, releasing my temper. “You know we *should* discuss the parameters of our relationship soon.”

“Soon.” He smiled broadly, something I’d never seen him do before. “It would be the *adult* thing to do.”

Stepping forward, I planted a kiss on his cheek. “Goodnight.”

When I came down the stairs the next morning Torvald and Kalea were already in the nook, wearing fresh clothes and polished crowns, and sipping hot tea. They didn’t appear different to me, much to my surprise and delight. Both looked up when I walked in, smiled, and bid me good morning.

“Lady Isa, is that a bruise I see developing across your knuckles?” Kalea asked, eyes wide.

I sat across from them and placed my hands in my lap. “Viggo accidentally stepped on my hand while we sparred last night. It’s nothing. It’ll heal in a few hours.”

“He should take better care while wrestling with you,” Kalea fretted. “You’re a warrior, yes, but you’re also a lady.”

“You’ve been a bad influence on her, my lord,” I said, smirking at Torvald.

The king feigned nonchalance. “I had nothing to do with this. She spoke of her own volition.”

“How are you feeling about this meeting?” I asked as the two servants who remained in the king’s house began to serve us.

Torvald sighed and ran a hand over his face. “I wish it didn’t have to be done. The counselors we’ve lost have been serving Holger since my father’s reign. They won’t be easily replaced, but our laws demand ten counselors per reigning period. I have to uphold tradition.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to accompany you?” Kalea asked, placing a hand over his on the table. “I’m not much help with politics, but I’d love to support you.”

Torvald smiled, dark eyes full of affection. “You’ll be bored to tears, my dear, but thank you for the offer. Hemming will be by to escort me to the meeting soon, but I’ll be back before you know it. Why don’t you spend the day with Lady Isa?”

The queen thought that was a splendid idea and speculated on what we should do while the king was occupied. She eventually settled on a horseback ride and whisked me out of the house after breakfast with only a fond farewell over her shoulder for her husband.

Kalea laughed. “At last!”

It had been a relief to finally tell someone that Viggo and I were involved, but the queen's reaction took all the joy out of the revelation.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, slightly indignant.

"Oh, Isa, it's been painfully obvious for a while that Viggo is in love with you. Haven't you ever noticed that you are the first person he looks for when he enters a room?"

"Anyone can be made uncomfortable when in the presence of strangers or royalty," I said, although, in reality I *hadn't* noticed. "A familiar face is like a safety blanket."

The queen made a razzing sound before continuing. "Haven't you ever noticed how upset he gets when he finds you hurt or bleeding by anyone's hand but his own? He would have fired the servant that accidently knocked you down the porch steps last week if you hadn't convinced him you were fine."

"Yes, well, he's been taking care of me since warrior academy. It's become second nature for Viggo to be protective."

"He didn't hesitate to ask you to dance after I made him aware of the other suitors at the wedding reception," Kalea pointed out.

I scoffed. "He could have only asked to be polite."

"He was ready to fight General Halvar during your altercation. Yes, I saw that," she added when I grimaced. "Torvald was ready to step in but I told him you would handle it. And you did, very quietly. Thank you."

Not as quietly as I would've liked, I thought with a pang of guilt. "Viggo would have defended any other friend in the same position," I said. "He's loyal."

"Why hasn't he found himself a sweetheart?" Kalea countered. "It wouldn't be hard. He's handsome, he's strong, and I've heard several female members of the royal family whispering about him."

I bristled at that. "He's been much too busy with the investigation to notice anyone noticing him."

Kalea sent me a sly smile. "He has eyes for no one but you."

The words sent a thrill down my spine. "Viggo doesn't beat around the bush. Ever," I said before she could see my red cheeks. "He's the most straightforward man I know."

"Except when it comes to matters of the heart. It's a common ailment among men." The queen sat up straighter upon her horse. "Perhaps he was waiting for a sign from you, one that would tell him his affections would be kindly received."

"Viggo doesn't fear rejection. He doesn't fear anything." Though now I wasn't so sure. It did take him over a year to admit how he felt about me, and that was only because he was pressured by Bryn.

The queen pursed her lips but her eyes were bright with

excitement. “Do you know what you’ll say to him? When he asks for your hand?”

I spurred Malie onward. “For heaven’s sake, Lady Queen. We’ve only just become romantically involved.”

Kalea encouraged her horse to trot a bit faster and caught up to me. “Forgive me, Lady Isa. You must understand. I have no sisters of my own. I think it would be wonderful if you and I could have children around the same time.”

I smiled. “Perhaps someday.”

We rode our horses to the edge of a cliff and looked down at the ocean.

Kalea tucked the free strands of hair behind her ear. “Torvald told me about Kenshore and the terrible acts of General Halvar.”

I turned with a start.

“I know you wish to kill him and avenge your family. I also know my husband sent spies with the general many weeks ago in the hopes of finding some proof of his treachery to bring before the counselors.” Kalea sighed. “No news has reached him. It distresses him to think that his messengers are dead simply because he sent them on this errand. It distresses him even more that the man behind the slaughter of your people has looked into the eyes of a king and lied. He’s going to propose an end to the Quest for Resources during this meeting.”

If I wasn’t already shocked, I might’ve gasped. “What reason will he give?”

“He hopes to use the general’s progress report. Halvar never gives anything but good news. Torvald will attempt to persuade the counselors that we have conquered enough healthy land to provide us with the necessary resources and colony space,” the queen replied. “He will propose bringing the diplomats and militia back to Holger, sending the immigrants to the new provinces after winter, and waiting for the new colonies to develop. In time, they will gather and discover more resources on their own land that they will then be able to share with those of us who remain on the island.”

“That sounds very reasonable,” I said.

“He plans to use Brynjar’s truth serum to interrogate the men under Halvar when they all return. Once the truth is out, he wants Halvar to be publicly tried. He wants to gain permission from the counselors to allow you to be the executioner and do things the proper, legal way.”

“After all this time, my people might actually receive justice. It’s hard to believe,” I murmured.

“There is hope, Asta of Kenshore,” Kalea said softly. “But don’t hope too much. Halvar may not be the only opposition to the king’s proposal. Victory and success have a way of manipulating even the

best of hearts. I know my father will stand by Torvald, but I can't with good faith guarantee that the other counselors will."

I nodded, unable to express my gratitude.

The horses nickered to each other as they took us across the plain. I beheld the landscape with new eyes, hope changing my view of the world. The colors around me seemed brighter, the air crisper and sweeter, the sun warmer and much more comforting.

"Will you go back?" the queen asked. "To Kenshore, I mean."

"Perhaps," I admitted, despite the memories of blood, fire, and those terrible screams. "But only to visit. There is nothing for me across the sea anymore."

Kalea let out a breath she'd been holding. "I'm glad to hear you say so. I don't know what we'd do without you."

The king was sitting in his favorite armchair when Kalea and I returned. From the troubled look on his face, I knew the meeting hadn't gone in his favor.

"What news?" Kalea asked.

Torvald sighed. "After I had given my speech on halting the Quest for Resources, General Halvar stood and said that the land he secured for our future colonies was not ready for immigrants. The neighboring provinces still need to be subdued in order for our people to be safe there and his men are still in the process of manufacturing the buildings for our new towns."

I'm sure they're having a difficult time balancing the act of hammering nails into wood and slaughtering innocents. I bit my tongue to keep from voicing this thought aloud.

"I asked how much more time would be needed in order for the buildings to be complete. He said he didn't know. When I proposed a goal of completion by the spring, he said he'd get back to me on that and then proceeded to remind everyone in the room how necessary patience was to our success." Torvald's face tightened in irritation. "He commented on the pride of today's youth and that the value of fortitude was lost on my generation. As if I was a child who didn't understand the business of men."

Kalea fell into the sofa next to his armchair and took his hand. "I'm sorry, dear."

"I expected opposition. I expected an argument. I didn't expect to be… belittled," Torvald said, leaning his elbows against his knees. "In all my years, General Halvar has never spoken to me like this."

"He had to keep his composure before the counselors, my lord. This was the only way to insult you without causing a scene, but surely Rakim knew what the general was up to. Didn't he speak on your behalf?" I asked.

“Rakim changed the subject entirely,” the king said. “I suppose he was trying to save me by redirecting the counselors’ attention to the matter at hand. That is, the matter of replacing the counselors who were killed. General Halvar had much to say on that subject as well. He has spent so many years at sea and yet he alone seems to know the best men for the available positions. He hardly let anyone else get a word in edgewise.” Torvald shook his head. “He knows I know the truth. He has to. Why else would he be so determined to appear superior in the counselors’ eyes all of a sudden? He never used to care for their good opinion before. He’s sending me a message.”

“And what message is that?” Kalea asked.

The king grimly met her gaze. “I can sway them better than you can.”

The queen shook her head. “Impossible. The counselors who remain are loyal to you and you alone.”

“I can vouch for Rakim and two others, but the last four heartily agreed with the general’s suggestions. No doubt these men Halvar mentioned worship the ground he walks on. Don’t you see? He’s looking to expand his influence not only on the mainland but here on the island as well. I’m starting to think Bryn was right about him being—” Torvald sat up when the butler entered the room.

The man bowed. “Your Majesty, might I offer some refreshments?”

“Nothing for now. Thank you,” the king said before gesturing to us.

“Water for me.”

“Chilled wine for me,” the queen said.

“I’ll return shortly.” The butler bowed and then retreated.

I sat across from Torvald and lowered my voice. “You said you didn’t want to become paranoid. You said you didn’t want to suspect every Holgarian.”

Torvald loosened his cravat with a savage yank. “It’s only the general’s motives that I’m suspecting. He’s been lying to me all these years about the Quest for Resources. He could be lying about everything else. I won’t be content until we find out whatever truth there is to find concerning him.”

“Neither will we,” I tried to reassure him by saying.

“That’s right,” Kalea said, taking his hand. “You forget that all of your friends are desperately looking for something to condemn the general with. They *will* succeed. It’s only a matter of time. Have patience.”

Torvald drew away from her. “That’s all I’ve been doing since the conspiracy first came to light. I can’t stand it any longer.” He rose. “It’s time I started acting like my father’s son.”

I stood with him. “What are you going to do?”

“A king’s proposal was too easily cast aside, but a king’s command won’t be. I’ll have a royal decree written and sealed with my signet ring. The Quest for Resources is to be paused until further notice. Every soldier will be called back home and will participate in mandatory interrogation concerning suspicious conduct overseas.” Torvald waved a hand at the window overlooking the upper ward. “The counselors can read about it in the morning.”

“My lord, I strongly advise against this. General Halvar’s suspicions will be confirmed the moment you seal that document,” I said in a rush. “I guarantee he’ll silence either you or his men before anyone has the chance to speak against him.”

The king marched into the hallway. “Let him try. I won’t be cowed into submission.”

Kalea and I shared a frightened look before hurrying after him.

“My dear, please, think about this for a moment,” Kalea said, delicately lifting the skirt of her dress so as to compete with his pace. “You’re already in danger, what with this league of traitorous Holgarians seeking to kill you. You can’t afford to make any more enemies.”

“I have four personal Defenders and at least a hundred soldiers chosen by Dotharr to stand between me and anyone who seeks to harm me.” Torvald threw the door open. “I have nothing to fear.”

“*I* have plenty to fear!” Kalea said. “I’ve only just married you. I intended to live a long life beside you before having to say goodbye. Don’t you care about how your demise would affect *me*?”

The king paused in the doorway. He sighed heavily and glanced at his wife over his shoulder. “I’m sorry, but we’ve earned nothing by being careful and secretive. It’s time to be bold.” His eyes found my face. “Are you with me?”

I swallowed hard. I knew I should be honest with Torvald and tell him about the terrible hold Halvar had over me. If it came down to a fight between us and the general, I would have to flee for the safety of my friends. But the desperation in my king’s eyes was unbearable. I couldn’t deny him.

“I’m with you, sire.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I knocked on Bryn's door. "It's Asta. Can I come in?"

After receiving a grunt in reply, I entered. Three books were propped open with wooden stands on Bryn's desk. Pages of parchment covered with his messy scrawl were scattered along the top of his bed. The floor was a tapestry of glass bottles and connecting tubes with bright blue liquid sloshing to and fro. Small burners were placed under certain bottles; sweet-smelling steam stifled the air despite the open window. Bryn paced before the contraption of glass bottles, hair askew. He wore nothing but a nightshirt that barely covered his lower extremities.

I stared fixedly up at the ceiling. "Bryn, what in Dotharr's name are you doing? Why aren't you wearing pants?"

"It was just what I needed: a good mystery to distract me from the exams coming up at the end of the week and the enormous amount of food for the anniversary celebration, which I've only begun to check for toxins," Bryn muttered. "Or so I thought. It turns out this little mystery is no less stressful than the other two impossible tasks I must take on."

"What are you talking about?"

Bryn grabbed something that crinkled and held it out to me. "I thought I'd take a break from testing the food to do a little studying and maybe take a nap, and there it was. Someone must have slipped it under my door after I left my room this morning."

I reached out blindly and managed to find the page. Then I turned my back on my inappropriately-dressed friend to read the note. "'I have admired you from afar for too long. We must meet. Please, write down a time and place, and leave it by the spring tonight at midnight. I anxiously await your answer. R.' It's a love note."

"Exactly!" Bryn exclaimed. "A love note from a secret admirer. Notice the lingering sweet smell over the parchment?"

I brought the page up to my nose. There was a residual sweetness wafting up from the parchment.

"I've been trying to bring out the remnants of the perfume so that I can identify the make, track down the seller, hopefully commandeer his list of customers," Bryn said, pacing somewhere behind me. "Then I can cross-reference every young lady whose first name begins with R on his list with Master Philo's list of the ladies who live on the royal grounds."

"Or you could follow your admirer's instructions, hide someplace nearby, and see who comes to collect the note," I said, holding the parchment out for him to take.

There was a long pause before he snatched the note from me. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company this afternoon?”

“Put some pants on and I’ll tell you.” I heard him rummage through his chest of drawers, muttering that he did his best thinking while pant-less. I rolled my eyes. “Are you done yet?”

“I’m decent.”

I turned to see him gathering the pages on his bed. “I like you better in trousers.”

Bryn frowned at me. “I’m exhausted and overworked, otherwise I would’ve figured out the secret admirer situation on my own.”

I nodded. “Yes, I’m sure you would have. You were wise to seek a nap.”

My friend placed the pile of parchment on top of his desk before flopping down on his bed. He took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes. “Now, what is it you came to talk to me about? Have you changed your mind about Viggo already?”

“What?” I sputtered. “No! Of course not.”

Bryn grinned at me, lowering his hand. “Good, because I’ve been his friend much longer than I’ve been yours. If you did come to your senses and realize you could do better, I would, unfortunately, have to side with him.”

“There is no one better than Viggo,” I said, frowning.

“And don’t you forget it.”

I pulled out his desk chair and sat. “What happened between you and Fia?”

“Not this again,” he groaned.

“You hate keeping secrets from the people you care about. How can you bear keeping this from me?”

“All right!” Bryn sat up and glowered at me. “I was thirteen. I was sick with a fever and head cold so my mother let me stay home from school. She went to her herb shop but promised to return during her lunch break to check on me. My father decided to be helpful that morning. He washed all the laundry while I was taking a hot bath, you know, to relieve my sinuses. Then he set everything out to dry on the clothesline, shouted a goodbye to me down the hall, and promptly left for work. When I was finished with my bath, I couldn’t find anything to dry myself with inside the house.”

I snickered. “Oh, no.”

Bryn plowed on as if afraid he would lose his nerve. “Fia was my next-door neighbor. She was sixteen and beautiful, and I thought I was in love with her. Little did I know that her younger brother was sick with a fever as well, and she had been allowed to stay home from school to take care of him. I snuck out the back door and checked to make sure no one else was around. Fia had taken a break from tending

to her brother and was lying in the grass, reading a book. I didn't see her. I thought I was in the clear. I dashed over to the clothesline and yanked on a drying towel. Fia heard the noise and rose to investigate. Thanks to the unreasonably short fences surrounding our backyards, she saw me in all my glory and laughed."

I placed a hand over my mouth to hide my smile. "She didn't."

"She continued laughing even after I had scurried back into the house." Bryn dramatically fell back into his bed. "She giggled whenever our paths crossed in the days that followed. She called me Pale Bum behind my back for months. I was completely humiliated. There! Are you satisfied?"

I fought to remain serious and lowered my hand. "I feel this experience has made us closer friends, Behnam. Thank you for confiding in me."

"You're welcome," Bryn said with a derisive snort. "Is that the only reason you came to visit me?"

All giddiness left me. I sunk back into the chair. "No. There was something else I needed to ask you."

He propped his head up with an arm. "Ask away."

I watched the blue liquid slopping around the glass tubes for a moment, summoning my courage. "Is there a way to undo what the general has done? Make me immune to his words?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, Asta," he said, blinking in surprise. "Why ask me?"

"You study mental health." I gestured to the books piled on his desk. "There has to be some teaching about the strengthening of one's mind in one of these. Have you come across anything that might help me?"

Bryn sat up slowly. "What's happened?"

I told him about the king's decree and my fear that it would lead to a fight I couldn't be a part of. I blinked away tears. "I think this was the general's intent all along; to get me hired as a Defender so that I could dispose of the king if Torvald ever got in Halvar's way. I would leave now if I could, but I can't abandon my friends. I can't abandon my quest for revenge." I leaned forward. "But if there was some way to reverse whatever the general did and make me the only master of my body—"

"You would be free to fight alongside us," Bryn said with a nod. "I understand."

I waited while he thought it over, my heart in my throat.

"What is the phrase the general uses to control you?" he asked at last.

"I lost the ability to control myself at the king's wedding after the general said, 'Will you do me a favor?'" The words felt heavy on my

tongue. Heavy with power.

"How do you feel?" Bryn asked. "Any different than before?"

I shook my head.

"Hmm…" He grimaced. "All right. I'm going to try now."

"I trust you," I said to ease his mind.

My friend frowned. "No one should have that kind of power over you. Not even someone you trust." He took a deep breath. "Will you do me a favor?"

I braced myself.

Bryn nodded at the pages on his desk. "Will you count those documents for me?"

I decided I wasn't going to do it. Then I reached for them.

Bryn blanched. "That will be all, Asta. That will be all."

I sank back in the chair, choked by discouragement.

"Well," Bryn said, his voice higher in pitch, "the good news is: if anyone can put you in the trance, then anyone can get you out." He cleared his throat. "Perhaps even yourself. Have you ever tried repeating the freeing phrase in your mind?"

I shook my head.

"We can start there. Practice saying both phrases out loud and in your mind. Perhaps hearing yourself say the words will diminish their power." He tapped his fingers against his leg, thinking. "I could also make you some form of earplugs so that you can block your hearing whenever the general is near."

"Can such devices be made? I didn't think it possible," I murmured.

"You can't just leave, Asta," Bryn said seriously. "Viggo would be tormented forever, and the knowledge that Halvar is still alive would haunt you for the rest of your days. You have to see this through to the end. I'll do what I can when the general tries to turn you against us. I will knock you unconscious if I must. But these earplugs, if made correctly, will help. I know they will."

I tried to be encouraged by his words but the fear remained. If I could save my friends by leaving, why risk staying? I took a deep breath and steeled my nerves. *Because they're my family now and I won't be forced to run from them.*

I sat on the porch steps, waiting for Hemming and Lennart. They would patrol the house tonight and tomorrow morning, Gabor would cover the afternoon and evening, and then we would all be on duty for the island's anniversary celebration.

Everyone who lived on the hill had received a copy of the king's decree today. Many of the counselors had come knocking on his door, demanding to meet with him. The good butler had been assigned the

duty of rejecting every visitor. I tensed whenever I heard someone at the door, praying it wasn't the general. Thankfully, Halvar didn't try to speak to Torvald today. I had dared to venture out of the king's home to speak to Master Philo about additional guards being posted around the king's home and the security detail he had prepared for the anniversary celebration. Other than that and my visit with Bryn, I had remained indoors. I'd had nothing to do but pace, worry, and practice reciting those awful phrases in my head.

I would unleash my anxiety on Lennart. I was tired of wondering whether he was truly on our side or not. When I saw my replacements approaching through the twilight, I rose. Anger and helplessness already burned within me, but I seethed at the sight of Lennart loping lazily toward me. He reeked of suspicion and disrespect. I hoped he gave me a reason to hit him.

"Lady Isa, are you well?" Hemming asked when they were near enough. "You look flushed."

"I'm quite well, thank you," I said through my teeth. "Lennart, a word?" I grabbed him by the arm and dragged him around the house before he could reply.

"This scolding technique of yours is getting old," he said.

I released him with a glare. "I know you abandoned your post to be with Lady Helka the night before last. How dare you leave your king defenseless in such a dangerous time?"

Lennart rolled his eyes. "He was safe enough with Gabor."

I struggled to keep my voice low. "How could you possibly know that? He could be in league with the traitors for all we know!"

Lennart snorted. "Gabor isn't nearly smart enough to—"

"Opinion," I snapped, raising a finger. "Not fact. His allegiance hasn't been confirmed, so he is still a suspect." I jabbed him roughly in the chest. "What do you think Master Philo would do if he knew how carelessly you acted?"

Lennart pretended to think about it, rubbing his sternum. "Well, since he doesn't know about the traitorous Holgarians plotting against our king, he would probably have a lot of questions for you."

"How would Finley feel if—?"

Lennart's eyes became cold as ice. "We'll never know, will we? He's dead, no thanks to you."

I threw a punch at his face, only to be intercepted by Hemming.

He caught my fist and gently pushed me back, serious as I'd ever seen him. "What in Nua's name is going on here?"

Lennart's eyes became half lidded and he adopted his usual bored look. "Lady Isa is throwing a fit."

I made a snap decision. "Lennart has been neglecting his duty to the crown. Viggo and I saw him walking with Lady Helka near Thistle

Pub the night before last, even though he was scheduled to guard the royal couple with Gabor. Finley never would have stood for this and neither will I."

Hemming threw Lennart a weary glance. "Is this true?"

Lennart made a face at him. "Does it matter? There's no authority here that can punish me for shirking my duty for *one* night."

"How can we be sure this is the only time you've done this?" I demanded. "You can't be trusted."

"She's right," Hemming said grimly. "And there *is* an authority who can punish you; King Torvald. I'll speak to him in the morning and he can decide what's to be done concerning you. Pray he doesn't decide to dismiss you. There will be little work for you on the island when word gets out as to why you were asked to leave the royal hill."

A vein began to throb in Lennart's forehead. "I was with Lady Helka that night because I was trying to extract sensitive information from her."

Hemming shook his head. "Now you're just grasping at straws, Lennart. Nothing you say will make up for your lack of judgment."

"You might have heard that Lady Helka has been entertaining guards in her quarters," Lennart said to me. "Many guards. The things she learns from them during their time together might be useful to our investigation. I wasn't able to learn much because that was our first encounter, but with time—"

"If I recall correctly, you said you weren't good at interrogations," I said, crossing my arms. "How did you manage to get any information from Lady Helka?"

"Don't bother," Hemming said before Lennart could reply. "She won't believe you. Go home. I'll come to call on you tomorrow when the king has a moment to see you."

Lennart threw Hemming a nasty look. "I won't be dismissed like a dog. You're not my superior."

"He's been here longer," I said. "That makes him your superior. If you can't walk back to your quarters on your own, I'd be happy to have some guards escort you there."

Lennart leaned forward to growl in my face. "Enjoy your little victory, Lady Isa. It won't last." Then he spun on his heel and stalked away.

"I assume I'll be read in on what's really going on later," Hemming said out of the corner of his mouth.

I felt a pang of guilt for having excluded him from our investigation. But I was still uncertain whether I should tell him the truth or not. "Later, yes. We should have a handful of guards keep an eye on Lennart's living quarters," I said at last, "just in case he does something foolish."

“You think he’ll run?” Hemming asked with a crease across his brow.

“I can’t fathom what he’ll do,” I said, suddenly tired. “That’s the problem.”

Hemming tapped a finger against his chin, thoughtful. “Finley always knew how to handle Lennart. Somehow, he figured out how to get Lennart to answer to and respect him. Now that he’s gone, I’m afraid Lennart has become something of a liability. He won’t answer to me; he’s made that quite clear. He obviously doesn’t care too much about the king’s safety if he’s abandoning his post whenever he feels like it. I think Lennart’s time on the hill may be over.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, unable to fight a sense of foreboding. “He knows too much about the goings-on here, and the king’s personal life. That information would be valuable to our enemies. We can’t afford to send him away. What has been done in the past in situations like this?”

“This is the first time I’ve contemplated having a Defender discharged,” Hemming said. “None of the others have lasted this long or put me in this position. I’ll bring it before the king. We’ll see what he wants to do about Lennart. For now, I think you’re wise to keep an eye on him.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I smiled and nodded when people acknowledged me, but continued walking the perimeter. The king would be making his speech soon. I had to be sure no suspicious characters were lingering by the stage or in the surrounding buildings.

We had chosen the same square for the island's anniversary celebration that we had for the king's wedding because the same escape routes Viggo and I had made in case of an emergency could be applied tonight. And also because it was the only space on the island large enough to hold all the attendees. So far, the evening was progressing well. The square was alight with paper lanterns, violet ribbons, cream-colored lace, boughs of baby's breath, and white roses with touches of ivy. The musicians played from the raised gazebo toward the back, tables and chairs were arrayed along the outer rim, and the dance floor had been installed in the middle. It was another enormous party.

There was feasting, dancing, and entertainers from Sippa's School of Arts. The air was filled with sweet fragrances and the hum of happy chatter. Thanks to the large bonfire that had been lit at sunset, even those with inadequate winter wear were warm.

I'd opted for a dress of my own design tonight, one made of maroon velvet with a gold trim. Despite Dagmar's disapproval, I refused to be stuck in a corset and a hoop skirt again. I didn't need to be as elegant tonight. This event, although prestigious, wasn't nearly as important as the wedding had been. Or so I told Dagmar. I had also managed to convince her that I didn't need all of my hair pinned on the top of my head; the lower half swung gently from side to side against my back as I walked. It was comforting and liberating. It seemed my speech about boundaries had done some good. I hoped my handmaiden would continue to consider my opinions on certain matters in the future.

Princess Evie raced by me with her infamous cousin Indria, two flashes of purple and pink puffs chasing a poor homeless dog across the square. Their laughter echoed back to me even through the crowds of people. I smiled, knowing Helka would see the spectacle soon and nearly faint in mortification. It only took a moment of searching to spot Prince Haskell, who stood by the buffet table with an innocent smile on his face while he sneakily spooned extra potatoes onto his already-full plate. I let my eyes wander to the tables where I soon spotted Prince Raoul, sulking. He glowered at Bryn, who danced with a young, petite girl with long brown hair and pretty hazel eyes. It appeared all had gone well with Bryn's secret admirer. Unfortunately

for Raoul, she just so happened to be Raziya, the girl who had rejected the prince two months ago.

I shook my head at the situation my friend had managed to find himself in and kept walking. Despite the enormous amount of work Bryn had done this week, he'd still found time to construct the earplugs for me. He created small ear-hole-shaped tubes made with a layer of candle wax and metal. Inside were several drops of water, which sloshed around when I walked. Even if some form of sound could penetrate the exterior, it would still have to compete with the sound of moving water in my sensitive ears. I was avoiding the general like the terrible plague he was, but if I did run into him, I could quickly slip the plugs into my ears and be protected.

I spotted Gabor, Hemming, and Viggo among the sea of faces around me. Lennart was currently under house arrest until Torvald could figure out what to do with him. Master Philo was here with his family along with most of the guards employed by our guard master. If our enemies decided to strike tonight, we would be ready.

My stomach growled when I passed the buffet table. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until just then. I snagged a plate and small portions so that I could finish quickly and continue patrolling. Then I found an empty table and sat.

"Lady Isa!" someone cried, drawing my eyes to the right. Out of the crowd came Helka and Bodil, dressed in golden and white ball gowns.

I managed a smile. "Good evening."

"I'm so glad you've found time to sit and rest, my dear," Bodil said. "What with all the excitement, I'm sure you're positively exhausted!"

"Thank you for your concern. Are you enjoying the festivities?"

Bodil adjusted the ridiculous white feather in her dark hair. "Yes and no. My husband danced with me once before mysteriously disappearing. The trouble with being married is that it is suddenly inappropriate to dance with anyone other than your husband. I've had to entertain myself by other means." She snapped her fingers at a passing server, who came and gave her a glass of champagne.

Helka took the seat beside me, fanning her flushed face with a wooden handheld fan. "I've been too busy chasing my children around the square to dance. Fortunately, the night is young."

"Is it?" I asked, unable to mask my disappointment.

Bodil laughed. "A woman looking forward to the end of a party? What an atrocity! But with your profession, we can hardly blame you, can we? If I had to concern myself with Torvald's safety all the time, I would hardly be in the mood for celebration either."

"Oh, Bodil, do hush up before you insult the Lady Warrior. You're

drunk," Helka said with a roll of her eyes.

Bodil hiccupped and placed a gloved hand over her mouth. "Do forgive me, Lady Isa. I didn't mean to insinuate that you were dull."

I raised a hand to ward off further apology. "I've taken no offense, Lady Bodil. Please, don't concern yourself with my feelings."

Helka *tssked*. "You're much too good to her. If someone had aimed a comment like that my way, I would have been quite put out, and I would've made them aware of it immediately."

"It takes a little more than a thoughtless comment to insult me," I said as I picked at my food.

"It is not so with General Halvar," Helka said slyly. "It seems the two of you argue whenever you see each other. What is it about the general that you find so distasteful?"

"Oh, that man!" Bodil said, collapsing into a chair with a frown. "He's rude and impossible to everyone he finds the least bit simple. If he wasn't so valiant and necessary to Holger's expansion, I would never speak a kind word to him."

Helka snapped her fan shut. "He's nothing but the perfect gentleman whenever we cross paths. He's even complimented me on the beauty of my children."

"The general and I have a history," I found myself telling Helka. "He has hurt me deeply, and is determined to make light of it. That I cannot forgive. If he's pleasant to anyone, it's only because he wants something from them or wishes to manipulate them in some way. I wouldn't let him near my worst enemy, much less my children."

Helka's jaw grew slack in shock. Bodil drew back in surprise.

I savagely cut my chicken into bite-sized pieces and filled my mouth before I could continue ranting.

"Well," Helka said once she had recovered. "I believe I have found the one topic of conversation that *will* offend you. I apologize, Lady Isa. I was merely curious about your relationship."

"There is none," I said around my food. I didn't care if it was rude. I didn't want to talk about the general anymore.

Raoul came ambling through the masses to our table. "Mother, have you seen Polk?"

"No, sweetheart. What do you need from him?" Bodil asked.

"I don't need anything from him," Raoul grumbled. "I thought I saw him pick one of the counselor's pockets earlier this evening and he's been avoiding me ever since. If Torvald catches him stealing, he's going to be publicly arrested. I'd rather avoid such humiliation on a night as important as this, wouldn't you?"

Bodil sighed heavily and stood. "I'll help you look for him."

Raoul cast a smile and a bow in my direction. "Lady Isa, you look ravishing as always."

“Thank you,” I murmured.

“If I return before the night is through, can I ask you to dance?”

I rose, making the legs of my chair scrape against the cobblestones. “Perhaps some other time. Please, excuse me. I must check on the king.” I fled and almost ran over Makoa, Torvald’s grandfather. “I’m so sorry, sir! Are you all right?”

The small, curve-backed gentleman gripped his cane and slapped a hand over his top hat to keep it from tipping off his head. He smiled up at me. “No need to apologize, my dear. It’s an honor to be run over by a goddess such as yourself.”

I bit back a smile. “You’re too kind, my lord.”

He looked like an old turtle with his hooked nose and small, round shape. The green suit he wore and the wisps of white hair along the sides of his head weren’t helping me draw any other comparisons. The wonderful thing about this man was that I could say he looked like a turtle and he would probably agree.

He gripped my hand. “Help an old man find his grandson, won’t you?”

“Do you mean Torvald? He hasn’t found you yet?”

“Of course not!” Makoa said with a laugh. “He’s having too much fun to think of me. It’s almost time for me to retire and I need to say goodnight. Come, come. I’m sure he’s around here somewhere.” Makoa placed my hand over the crook of his arm and hobbled forward.

After I helped Makoa find Torvald, I helped him into his carriage, then hurried back to the king’s table. Rakim had joined his daughter and new son-in-law. He sat beside the king, speaking quietly but urgently. Torvald frowned, serious but also slightly confused. Kalea nibbled on her food, eyes shifting between her father and her husband.

I rushed to the table. “Is something wrong, Counselor?”

Rakim leapt from his seat, knocking his knees against the table and spilling the king’s wine over the tablecloth. “Lady Isa, you mustn’t sneak up on people like that! Now, look at the mess I’ve caused. I-I must find a server to clean this up immediately.” He bowed to the king. “Do forgive me, sire.” Then he bolted away like a terrified deer.

I gaped after him for a moment before turning to Torvald. “What was that about?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Torvald said, still frowning. “He just appeared out of nowhere and began talking about my father.”

I sat in Rakim’s abandoned chair. “What about King Tatsuo?”

“Rakim said he and the other counselors had done what was necessary to protect Holger. They never regretted their decision. He

seemed to think the counselors who died were killed because they voted in favor of dethroning my father."

Kalea gasped. "Could it be so?"

Torvald nodded. "The story the public was told is different from Rakim's account. I grew up hearing it was a unanimous vote, that all the counselors agreed to my father's dethronement. Apparently, it was Odalis who suggested it and Cade who seconded the notion. I don't know of Ganix's role, but this is too coincidental not to be true."

"The counselors who remain?" I asked, heart thumping wildly. "Were any of them involved? They could be the next victims."

Torvald thought for a moment. "Counselor Madden provided the executioner when things turned sour, that everyone knows. I think I recall Rakim mentioning Counselor Feng as well." He paled. "Rakim himself would have definitely spoken out against Tatsuo."

Kalea rose. "We have to find him!"

"*I'll* find him," I said, stretching out a restraining hand. "We can't let the people know something is amiss."

Kalea fell back in her chair, eyes frantic. "You have to protect him, Isa. With my mother's failing health, he's all the family I have."

"Calm yourself, Lady Queen," I said as soothingly as possible. "No harm will come to him. I promise you." I turned to Torvald. "Go up on the stage and give your speech as planned. I'll send Viggo with the additional guards to keep an eye on you while I search for Rakim."

"Thank you, Asta." Torvald laid an arm around his wife's shoulders and murmured more reassurances as I left them.

I walked briskly through the multitudes of people and onto the dance floor, muttering, "Follow me," to Bryn as I passed him. I heard him politely excuse himself from his partner. Raziya whined and begged him not to go until after the song had ended, but he managed to extract himself somehow.

He fell into step beside me a moment later. "What's happened?"

"Rakim just gave us the event that connects our murdered counselors," I said out of the corner of my mouth. "They were involved in King Tatsuo's dethroning. Counselors Madden, Feng, and Rakim himself also played a part. They're in danger."

"If there was ever a time for our enemies to make a statement, it would be now," Bryn agreed. "I'll find Hemming and have him quietly escort Madden and Feng from the square. I just saw them at the refreshment table."

"Have you seen Viggo? I need him to watch the king while I search for Rakim."

Bryn cast a glance over his shoulder. "We crossed paths before Raziya demanded a dance. I believe he was on his way to check up on the guards watching the northern side."

“All right. Send word with a guard once the counselors are safely returned to the hill.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bryn said with a faint, anxious smile before we parted ways.

I faced the northern side of the square and continued my rapid walk, praying Viggo was still with the guards stationed there. I let out a sigh of relief when I caught sight of him ahead, ambling in my direction.

“All is well?” I asked once we met.

“For now. What news do you bring?”

I told him.

Viggo’s eyes darkened with worry. “Are the counselors accounted for?”

“Bryn went after Madden and Feng. Rakim has disappeared. I need you to watch the king so I can find him.”

Viggo shook his head. “As a Defender, your priority must be the king. You can’t keep abandoning him the moment something more pressing comes up. I’ll search for Rakim.”

“But I gave Kalea my word that no harm would come to her father!” I glanced around to be sure no one had heard my outburst and then lowered my voice. “Our enemies have waited an awfully long time to continue their vendetta. They’re planning something big. They’re going to make a statement tonight. I just know it. I have to see this through.”

Viggo took my hand, glowing eyes locked on mine. “No one will die tonight.” He leaned in to brush my cheek with a kiss. “I give you *my* word.” Then he was gone.

I bit my lip, fear and anxiety frothing within. “Damn him!” I hurried back to the king’s table, wishing Viggo could hear my thoughts as well as everything else. *Please, be careful.*

I arrived in time to witness Torvald and Kalea ascending the stage. The people stopped whatever they were doing to applaud the royal couple. To their credit, they did a marvelous job promoting that all was well. Kalea stood by her husband, aiming a proud and enamored smile his way. The king peeked at her out of the corner of his eye, a little shy but seemingly happy to be beside her, as he pulled out a roll of parchment from his pocket. The guards stood behind, before, and at either end of the stage, as they had been instructed. I walked around the royal table and made my way through the first few rows of people.

“Good evening, my fellow Holgarians,” the king said. “Welcome to the island’s five hundred and second anniversary!”

More cheers. More applause. I found a spot that gave me a good view of the stage and stayed there to clap.

Torvald held his hand up for silence and received it. “It has been an honor and a joy to grow along with you on our great island. Though Holger has struggled in years past, it thrives today thanks to the efforts of our warriors, our counselors, and you, the people willing to do whatever is necessary to better your community.”

“Let’s not forget our ever humble and caring king,” Kalea chimed in, roping an arm through her husband’s.

The throng cheered again. Torvald smiled, clearly embarrassed. I clapped and lazily ventured across the second row to a new vantage point. All the while, I cast an eye out to the crowds, the buildings surrounding the square, the guards holding their positions. Looking for anything out of the ordinary. Hoping to catch a glimpse of Viggo dragging Rakim out of the square.

“Thank you, my dear,” the king said before returning to his notes. “Tonight we celebrate more than another year since the island’s discovery. We celebrate each other and the accomplishments we’ve made.” There was only the slightest hesitation before he continued. “We celebrate the progress we’ve made overseas, and the hope it brings to future generations. We celebrate the restoration of the southern section, the lumber deliveries, and the new wood-burning stoves installed in each home. We celebrate the advancement of science and technology, and the new doctors graduating from Ishem’s School of Science. We celebrate the new blessings from Dotharr in his anointed warriors.”

Sparse applause followed. I moved onto a third position near the right side of the stage, casually looking over my shoulder at the people and, once again, the buildings. This time, I did see something out of the ordinary. An open window allowed curtains to flutter out in the frigid breeze on the third story of a nearby building. I stepped back, hoping to get a glimpse of whoever was inside. Why would they want to let in the freezing cold air? Why wouldn’t they join the festivities if they lived so close to the square?

I continued in my backwards walk while the king’s speech persisted, my curiosity growing. Inside the room, two people struggled with something that looked suspiciously like a bow. I didn’t think. I ran, shoving people aside.

A shout drew eyes to the building in time to see a body fall from the window. I skidded to a halt, heart stopping for a moment as the body of a man twisted end over end and landed on the cobblestones with a sickening *thud*.

Panic ensued.

Screams filled the air.

Several ladies to my right fainted.

My blood roared in my ears. It hadn’t been Viggo; the hair on the

falling man hadn't been dark enough. If it wasn't Viggo, then who could it be? A horde of people crowded around the body before I could reach it. A sudden thought hit me like a thunderclap. No bow had fallen with the body. I looked up at the open window while the people ran in all directions in search of safety. I couldn't make out the face of the man inside, but I could see the new direction in which his arrow was facing.

I ran for the stage, screaming, "Torvald! Run!"

The king didn't hesitate to grab his wife and heave her to the back end of the stage. The guards saw the royal couple bolt and dashed after them. The arrow soared over the square and sank through the short curtain adorning the stage. The stage burst into a ball of fire before my eyes. I barely had time to shield my face before the heat and force of the explosion reached me, catapulting me back into the swarms of people.

* * *

Sylvi trotted beside me on her chestnut brown horse, anxiously gripping the reins and eyeing the ground below. "Are you sure this is safe, Asta? Oh, whoever thought of riding sidesaddle was an imbecile! I just know I'm going to lose my balance atop this beast and fall."

"That will be all, Asta," the general said lazily.

My father laughed his big belly laugh and lifted me up from the ground. "A lady playing in the mud? Your mother will have a fit! Oh, that will be a fun spectacle." He whisked his little girl into the house, calling, "Auden, my sweet, just look at what Asta has done!"

"There," my mother said, placing a pearl tiara on the top of my head. "Now you're perfect." She smiled at me through the mirror, looking like a queen with her fancy up-do and her diamonds. "Happy birthday, dear."

"That will be all, Asta," I whispered to myself in the darkness.

"It was a good book you were reading yesterday," Kustaav said in his soft, level voice. "I'm sorry if I'm being too forward, but I couldn't help noticing you in the yard. Not many girls your age like to read, especially historic pieces. It's something to be admired."

"Good morning, Miss Asta," Fiske said with a quick smile and a wink. "You're looking lovely as ever. Where are you off to today?"

"Asta!" Irma called, abandoning her other friends to race toward me, beaming. "There you are! Are you still coming over to my house for evening tea?"

The sun set over a sea of yellow wheat, swaying in the gentle summer breeze. A girl in a school uniform with her hair in a mess and no shoes on her feet sat in her favorite perch. She plucked a red-gold apple from the

branch just above her and took a bite as she watched the sky change colors. There she was hidden. There she was safe. There she could watch the beautiful world around her and be satisfied… for a moment.

A ball of fire burst into being. My beautiful Kenshore burned before my very eyes. Suddenly, I was lost in the crowd, frantically wrestling against people seeking refuge. I caught sight of my family's carriage, being raided by men with glowing copper eyes. I screamed.

"Will you do me a favor?" the general asked, his voice snaking around my head.

"Will you do me *a favor?" I snapped.*

The sound of an arrow being released sliced through the air.

I peeled my eyes open. My skin felt leathery, and tight, as if it were stretched over something far too large. My hands were blistered and uncomfortably hot. When I raised them to my face, I saw they were wrapped in bloodstained cloth. I tried to sit up, but every muscle in my body protested. My head pounded to the beat of a wild song. I could only take shallow breaths because of the pain in my chest. I looked around to see I was in a small room with only the bed I laid in and two stools to fill it.

I must be in… the hospital, I thought somewhat groggily. There was only momentary confusion before I remembered the explosion. I dared a peek down at the rest of my body. Under the loose green tunic I wore, moist strips of cloth had been laid over every part of me, no doubt soaked in special ointments to help the burns heal. I shuddered to think what my face looked like.

Viggo hastily sat up in the seat beside my bed, rubbing sleep from his eyes so they could better focus on me. His hair was standing on end, and there were creases of exhaustion all over his face. He appeared to be wearing the same suit he had for the island's anniversary celebration, although it was wrinkled and torn in some places. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came. He reached for my hand, but then saw the bandages and thought better of it. He let his hands fall back into his lap. His dear, copper eyes filled with tears before they turned away from me.

"I'm sorry, Asta," he croaked. "I'm so sorry."

"Who was the man?" I swallowed and cleared my throat, but it made little difference. "Who was the man that fell out the window?"

Viggo reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a faded piece of worn parchment. He unfolded it and placed it in my lap without a word.

I leaned forward to read it better.

Viggo,

The time has come. I hate to be dramatic, but the hour for my escape is at hand. If you're reading this, I'm well on my way to freedom. I'm sorry it had to be this way. You know I would have stayed and trained beside you if I could, but my heart won't be denied. Please, don't be too angry with me. You're where you need to be; now I must find where I belong. This isn't a permanent goodbye. Come meet me at my mother's herb shop once you've graduated. You and Asta both.

I know how you feel about her. Perhaps in the beginning you resented her because you didn't think her worthy, but it isn't so anymore. I don't know when it happened, but I can see your opinions have changed. As has your heart. Don't be afraid to tell her the truth. Love is no sign of weakness. Take care of her. I'll ask her to take care of you. Don't fight her. It'll make me feel better knowing someone is watching over you in my absence.

Until we meet again, brother.

Behnam

I blinked in surprise. "This is the letter Bryn asked me to deliver to you the day he left the academy."

Viggo laughed, somewhat hoarsely. "You asked me once when it was that I started loving you. I think it was the time you stood up to me at the Feasting Hall. I was surprised, outraged, but also impressed. You weren't anything like I thought you would be. Bryn has always been quick to help the injured. It's the doctor in him. But I no longer questioned his choice to give you his respect. You defended yourself so easily in the washroom, without training, without help. After that, I stopped joining the others in sullying your name. I stopped encouraging their gossip. I even silenced a group of young men once, saying if Bryn thought well of you then so should everyone else. You excelled in your classes, you stood up to Director Endre, you told anyone who would listen that you were keeping your true name, and then… you handed me this letter."

He took back the note and refolded it, eyes downcast. "Bryn said it so casually, so easily. I couldn't believe it. Love? He was crazy! I hardly knew you. It didn't make any sense, and yet it was true. I started to take an interest in your well-being as a favor to my friend, but I stayed because it felt as if I had suddenly been given permission to. I watched you train, I watched you grow, and so did my respect and affection. Somehow, without me realizing, you became my treasure to protect."

Heat rose to my cheeks. *Treasure?* I thought back to our academy days, back when our friendship had barely begun. The night I was assaulted in my room, Viggo had come to my rescue. That look on his face when he'd seen me, lying on the floor with blood dripping past my lips from where I'd been kicked. He'd been so angry… so protective. I'd assumed it had been because of Bryn's last words, the ones telling us to take care of one another. I knew he'd do anything for Bryn, even put up with someone he didn't particularly care for. But he thought me a treasure?

"I vowed to let no harm come to you." Unaware of my fluttering heart, Viggo crumpled the parchment in his hand. "But time and time again I've failed you."

I reached out to him with my cloth-encased hands. "Don't say that. The things that have happened to me couldn't have been prevented by anyone."

Viggo swung livid eyes to my face. "But I should have done *something*. I've been a step behind since we graduated. I should have told you the truth then. I should've fought my hardest during graduation and prevented you from being hired as a Defender. I should've kept you *away from here*!" He shouted those last words, stuffing the crumpled letter into his jacket pocket.

I winced and fell back against my pillows. "Viggo, please, keep your voice down. My ears…"

He pressed his lips together, abandoning his righteous fury and adopting a remorseful look.

"It was Rakim, wasn't it?" I said, remembering the body falling out of that window. "Rakim is dead."

Viggo nodded miserably.

"Kalea and Torvald?"

"They're being treated, but their burns are minor compared to yours," he said.

"Were there any other casualties?"

"Several guards lining the stage perished in the blast."

"Any civilians?"

Viggo shook his head.

"Well," I said in an attempt to be positive, "that's something. What caused the blast? It was like nothing I'd ever seen before."

"It appears barrels of oil had been set up under the stage without our knowledge," Viggo reported somewhat monotonously. "The arrow struck a lit lantern which then ignited the barrels and caused the explosion. It was an incredible shot…"

I braced myself before asking, "How badly is my face burned?"

"Not very badly," Viggo said, scooting closer. "Your hands protected it. It's the rest of you that has needed serious tending to. Dr.

Ichiro and Bryn have been working around the clock to help you heal."

"And you're all right?" I asked, searching the length of him for any sign of injury.

"Yes, I'm fine. I was in the apartment," he explained. "I asked around until someone remembered seeing him leaving the square and entering the apartment complex. Rakim was tied to a chair when I found him. He was unconscious, but woke when I began freeing him. He had been lured there by Lennart."

My jaw dropped. "No."

Viggo nodded grimly. "He returned to the apartment before Rakim was completely freed from his bonds. The counselor liberated himself while I fought Lennart and then ran to the window, most likely with the intent to shout for help. Then my opponent struck me in the face with the butt of his bow and took aim. I heard the arrow fly, but I didn't stay conscious long enough to see who he shot." Viggo sat beside me on the bed, face crumpling in shame. "I thought it was me. I was so relieved when I woke. Then I saw the smoke, the chaos in the square, the remains of the stage, and…"

"It wasn't your fault," I insisted.

"I gave you my word that no one would die last night and yet eight men did!"

"Again, you couldn't know what was going to happen. You did what you could and that is all anyone expects from you. Including me. I don't want to hear another word about it," I added when he opened his mouth to interrupt. "What became of Lennart? Were we able to catch him?"

"No," Viggo said crossly. "The guards that you sent to watch him were found dead this morning. They were stuffed into one of the closets in his living quarters, which were stripped. He left nothing behind. He's fled."

I gritted my teeth in frustration. "He was working with the traitorous Holgarians the whole time."

Viggo ran a hand over his tired face. "I think it's safe to assume so, yes."

"Then we'll see him again," I said, suddenly determined. "When we find the leader of these traitors, we'll force him to give us the names of every man working with him. We should start with all of Lennart's friends, anyone he showed even the slightest bit of interest in."

"Including Lady Helka and any counselors who could stand his company," Viggo said with a nod.

Someone knocked on the door and then a guard partially entered the room. "Master Viggo?"

Viggo rose from the bed. “Yes?”

The guard noticed I was awake and bowed his head. “So sorry to bother you, Lady Warrior.”

“It’s all right, guardsman. What message do you bring?” I asked.

“It’s Prince Haskell, miss. He says he has to speak to you. He was quite insistent.”

I placed my cloth-covered hand over Viggo’s back before he could answer. “Bring him in.”

“Yes, miss.” The guard retreated.

Viggo raised an eyebrow at me over his shoulder. “You think he knows who set the barrels?”

“I think he knows *something*,” I said. “I’d rather see him now, before he changes his mind and runs away again.”

The door opened a moment later to reveal the young prince. He looked haggard and close to tears.

“Hello, Prince Haskell,” I said. “How can we help you?”

Haskell looked into my face and winced. He wrung his hands, averting his gaze.

“Lady Isa needs her rest, Lord Prince,” Viggo said, though not unkindly. “Please, speak your mind quickly.”

The boy swallowed hard. “P-Promise I won’t be punished for speaking.”

“No one will punish you for telling the truth,” I said. “Haskell, are you all right?”

“It was Mother,” he blurted out, tears streaming down his face. “Mother killed those counselors.”

Chapter Thirty

Viggo nudged the young prince forward. “Go ahead. Tell your brother what you told Lady Isa and me.”

Torvald propped himself up on his elbows and gave the boy his undivided attention. Because it was his back that had been mostly burned, he had to lie on his belly while he healed.

Haskell sniffled. “Mother’s been sneaking strange men onto the hill.”

“What?” the king asked. “How?”

Haskell wiped his nose with the back of his hand before continuing. “There’s a secret panel in the southern side of the wall. You know, toward the back of the hill? Mother sneaks out of our rooms at night and opens the panel to allow them in. They’re always dressed like guards, but she has to give them fake documentation plaques. Then she leads them back to our rooms in the jade building. She pretends to be… entertaining them, I think. Whenever any of the real guards see her with the impostor, she giggles and drapes herself all over them. The moment they’re out of sight, she becomes serious and distant.”

Haskell’s lips trembled. “The m-men come into our living quarters, but then sneak out through the laundry chutes. They come back hours later. Mother hand washes their clothes and cleans up any mess they make coming back up the hatch while they rest in her bedroom. Then she sneaks them out the same way they came in. And every morning following one of their visits, there’s a report of a counselor who has died mysteriously in the night.”

Torvald stared at his half brother as if in a trance.

Viggo waited a moment, no doubt hoping the king would speak. When no words came, Viggo gave Prince Haskell’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Thank you, Lord Prince. That couldn’t have been easy to share a second time.”

“How do you know this, Haskell?” Torvald finally managed to ask.

“I-I followed her,” the boy sobbed. “Lady Isa told me to keep an eye out for anything suspicious and Mother had been acting suspicious for weeks. She ordered a package from a place with a strange name. I was home when it arrived. I asked her about it later and she yelled at me. She said I wasn’t allowed to touch her things, but it wasn’t my fault! Who else was going to answer the door?”

“The package contained…” Viggo prompted.

“S-Sorry,” Haskell hiccupped. “The package contained thin silver sheets that are used to make documentation plaques. I crept out of my

room that night, after Mother thought I was sleeping, and I watched her create the new plaques. Then she hid them in her desk and went to bed. I wasn't sure what they were at first, but then I recognized them. Each metal sheet had a name, a date of birth, and 'guard' listed as the occupation. Each plaque was attached to a piece of cord."

"You could've seen a documentation plaque on any guard and described it," the king said. "Do you have any proof?"

Haskell blinked. "Mother always melted the plaques once she was through with them. I took a blank metal sheet, though." He dug through his pockets and produced one.

Viggo took it and handed it to Bryn. "What do you think?"

Bryn raised the little rectangular piece of metal to the light and carefully turned it from side to side. "My documentation plaque shimmers in the light. This one doesn't."

"Then how could these fake guards not be discovered?" I wondered. "Any member of our security could spot the difference right away."

"Documentation plaques are only brought before the light at the portcullis located at the base of the hill," Viggo said. "Anyone on the hill who doesn't have a plaque is stopped and questioned. Otherwise —"

"As long as you're walking the grounds with a plaque around your neck, you won't be bothered," I assumed.

"Well," Torvald said, voice pinched with shock. "That's going to change. Immediately."

"What's going to happen to Mother?" Prince Haskell cried. "Is she going to be executed?"

"We'll determine her punishment at a later time," Bryn said soothingly. "You're free to go, Lord Prince. Thank you for coming. Please, tell no one else what you've seen."

Haskell was reluctant to go, but after more reassurances that he wasn't in trouble, he finally left the king's hospital room.

I was going to run a hand over my face but then remembered both were wrapped. I let my hand fall back into my lap with a sigh. "I never saw this coming."

The king laughed but it was off. "That goes double for me. Helka, my almost stepmother… a traitor. All these years, I've taken care of her. I've offered her a place at my table." Anger made him tremble. "I've helped parent her children. I've honored her. How could she do this?"

I cleared my throat to get Viggo's attention. He came to move me and my wheelchair closer to the king's bedside.

"Sire," I said softly. "I can't imagine what you must be feeling right now, but we need to discuss how we're going to proceed."

"It's really quite simple," Torvald said, dark blue eyes aflame. "She committed treason. She must be executed."

"But, sir, she's—"

"I know who she is!" the king shouted. "I gave her special treatment *because* she bore my father's children, and look at how she repaid me. She chose to commit the crime. Now, she will receive the same punishment any other traitor would."

"My lord, she may be involved with the Holgarians trying to kill you," Viggo said urgently. "She could give us names, locations, assets."

"Interrogate her, then," Torvald said, crossing his arms over the mattress before him. "Arrest her. Force her to drink Brynjar's truth serum if you must. *Then* she will still be publicly tried and executed."

"What about Haskell and Evie?" Bryn asked. "They'll have no one."

"They'll have me," the king said with a dismissive huff.

Bryn stepped forward. "Haskell will have to live with the fact that his word had his mother killed. There has to be another option, sire."

"Torvald," I said before he could start shouting again. "Please. Couldn't we just… banish her to the mainland?"

The king's hands tightened into fists. "I will not yield." He glared at the three of us. "Leave me."

Viggo carefully set me back down on my bed. I felt hollow, as if someone had scooped out my insides with a giant spoon. I'd never seen Torvald so upset. In his anger, he had become a different person. It was unsettling. My head felt heavy all of a sudden.

Helka, a traitor. It didn't seem possible. I had to wonder if Prince Haskell would have told us about her treachery if we had left him out of our investigation.

In the end, it doesn't matter, I thought numbly. *Helka is still going to die.*

I wasn't sure why I felt so morose. Helka knew the price for treason was death. She chose to plot against the king and his counselors anyway. She deserved to be punished.

Bryn sat in the chair beside my hospital bed with a mournful sigh. "Those poor children."

"They'll be all right," Viggo murmured. "Once the king's anger has melted away, he'll come to his senses and choose another punishment for Lady Helka."

"How can you be sure?" I asked. "Didn't you see him? He looked like he was ready to commit murder."

"Anger is a normal response to betrayal, but we know the king's character," Viggo said. "If he had Lady Helka executed, it would haunt

him forever. He'll find another solution."

"I hope you're right." Bryn sighed again. "So, shall we bring Lady Helka in for questioning?"

Viggo shook his head. "Not until our burn victims have recovered. If Lady Helka noticed Haskell's absence, she might suspect something. We don't want to confirm Haskell's betrayal by storming into her rooms the moment he comes back from his secretive errand. Besides, the king's mind might have changed in a few days' time. I'd rather Lady Helka's fate be decided before we apprehend her."

"And if she decides to sneak more assassins in?" Bryn asked. "There are still two counselors left who dared dethrone her one and only love. Her vendetta isn't over."

"I'll station guards around the secret panel," was Viggo's reply. "She'll have to think of another way to smuggle them in if she's determined to see this through. I'll talk to Master Philo about instating more rigorous inspections of documentation plaques immediately."

Kalea hadn't said a word since I'd been wheeled into her room. She let me explain why I hadn't been there when her father had been murdered, she let me apologize for breaking my promise to her; she even let me give her an update on Torvald, Viggo, Bryn, and the investigation. But she refused to speak to me. She, like the king, had sustained burns on her back, thighs, and calves. She opted to lay on her side with a blanket draped over her. She stared at the wall, eyes red-rimmed from crying but currently dry. Her long, blond hair had been washed and brushed, and arranged so that it fell away from the angry burns across her shoulders. She was so pale and still. If it weren't for the steady rising and falling of her chest, I would've thought she was dead.

Dr. Ichiro said she was physically fine. The burns, although widely spread, were only of the first degree and would heal quickly. With Bryn's pain-relieving ointment being lathered over the affected spots twice daily, the queen experienced very little discomfort. Nurses came into her room every hour on the hour to ask if she wished to be repositioned. She wouldn't eat left on her own, but she accepted food and water when they were given to her. She simply refused to speak.

I couldn't help the guilt that threatened to strangle me. Kalea mourned her father, and her father had died because I let him out of my sight. I tried to follow my own advice and convince myself there was nothing I could've done to save Rakim. Still, I ached for the queen.

I cried into my bandaged hands. "I'm so sorry, Kalea. Please, say you forgive me. I can't bear your silence any longer!"

"Then leave," she croaked. "I don't wish to speak to anyone, you

least of all. Nurse!"

A young lady in a white uniform came to wheel me away. She eased me back into my own bed, saying I shouldn't take the queen's anger personally. I found little comfort in her words.

I tossed and turned that night, hating death and murder more passionately than when I'd killed Gosta. These atrocities had twisted the people I cared about and turned them against me. I wished them abolished. I wished they'd never existed. I cried myself to sleep, lonely and bitter.

Then I woke in the dead of night, having somehow fallen asleep on one of my hands. I tugged it out from under my cheek and rolled over into a more comfortable position.

There, fast asleep in the chair by my bed, was Viggo. His head lolled back and to the side, his mouth hanging wide open. He wore academy-approved lounging clothes, had his feet propped up on my bed and his leather slipper-like shoes stacked neatly on the floor.

Bryn lay curled up in the corner of the room under a blanket of parchment. Someone had been nice enough to lay a bed cushion down for him, but he seemed to have rejected the pillow and opted for a pile of books instead. He must have knocked over the bottle of ink in his sleep because his bare foot stuck out from the cushion and was stained black.

I vaguely wondered how they managed to sneak in without waking me, but didn't concern myself too much with that mystery. They preferred to endure discomfort so long as they could be near me, and it warmed my heart. I settled back into my bed and shut my teary eyes, not feeling quite as lonely as I did before.

* * *

"I wish I was blessed by Dotharr," Torvald murmured, slathering butter on his toast. "Your burns were more severe than mine and yet you already look better than I feel."

"I feel about the same," was my response.

The king glanced at me before setting his bread aside. His voice grew soft. "I'm sorry, Asta. I didn't mean to offend you."

I shook my head. "You haven't offended me, sire."

"What's the matter then?" he asked, leaning forward slightly.

I lifted my eyes with difficulty and met his gaze. "I saw Kalea yesterday."

"She blames you for her father's death," he realized.

I nodded glumly.

Torvald sighed. "I'm not going to have Helka executed."

"Really?"

The king turned back to his tray of food. "I've given it a great deal of thought and Bryn was right. I can't do that to the children. I'm their brother, their king, and soon-to-be guardian. I can't also be the man who had their mother killed. Helka will be publicly branded a traitor and banished to the mainland. What happens to her after that will be none of our concern."

"I'm happy to hear of it, sire," I said because it did seem to be chasing away my gloom.

"You must've thought me savage when I suggested it," he went on sullenly. "But with Halvar's betrayal, the loss of my counselors, and Rakim…" His voice cracked. Torvald stared intently down at his oatmeal, wrestling with his grief. "It was the last straw."

"I understand."

He managed a half smile. "If I've managed to change my mind, so will Kalea. Give her more time. She'll come to you when her mind has cleared."

* * *

"There," Dagmar said, running the brush through my hair one more time. "Isn't that better?"

It made little difference to me, but I nodded all the same. "Thank you."

"Your healing ability is a marvelous thing," she said, smiling at me through the mirror. "Four days in the hospital and already your face looks good as new."

This wasn't entirely true; there were still blotches of pink along my jaw line and forehead, not to mention the red scars on my neck. I suddenly thought of General Halvar.

His face must have been burned to the bone, I thought with a shudder. *Otherwise his skin would have grown back and he wouldn't have any scars*.

"It feels like ages since I've braided your hair. I think I'll do that now." She wove her hands through my hair and began to separate it before I could object. "I know you're only resting and you don't care what your hair looks like, but I've missed working on it. I won't make it too tight, I promise. You'll hardly know it's there. How are her hands, Doctor?"

Dr. Ichiro had just finished applying a combination of burn cream and Bryn's pain-relieving ointment over my inflamed palms. Now he considered them thoughtfully as he wrapped them with new bandages. "The blisters have miraculously disappeared, leaving only

scars behind. If I hadn't looked at these just yesterday, I would think they were only first-degree burns. Does it still hurt very much to use them?"

"They sting, but it's nothing compared to the throbbing of two days ago. Thank you, Doctor."

The old owl lookalike smiled and bowed his head. "You make it easy to care for you, my lady."

"How are the king and queen faring?" I asked as he packed his medicines away.

"They are progressing quite well. I'd say a day or two more of the same treatment will do the trick. The king is walking now. He was pacing in his room when I went to check on his burns earlier."

"Pacing," I said, suddenly anxious. "Did he look distressed?"

Dr. Ichiro frowned. "He seemed lost in thought when I interrupted him, and he was hesitant to answer my questions, as if distracted."

"What are you thinking, Lady Isa?" Dagmar asked. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't know," I said, preparing to climb out of bed. "But I'm going to find out. Thanks for coming to visit me, Dagmar. My hair looks lovely."

My handmaiden held out a hand to restrain me. "Don't even think about walking. I'll wheel you over to the master's room."

"My hands were the most badly burned, and they're very close to being completely healed. That should be enough to convince you that the rest of me is fine. I'm perfectly capable of walking." I gave her a stern look when it seemed she would continue arguing.

My handmaiden forced her mouth shut with great difficulty and accepted my verdict. "Well, I guess I should be going then. I'll be back tomorrow to hear what you found out from the master. You *will* tell me if anything is bothering him?"

"I will," I promised.

"Good." Dagmar gathered her hairbrush and knitting supplies, bid the doctor good day, and proceeded to leave the room.

The doctor lent me his elbow as I made to rise. I took it with a murmured *thank you* and eased out of the bed. My feet touched the cool floor for the first time in days, causing me to shiver. I smiled. It felt good to not be so restricted by pain. My legs, empowered with new strength, took me to the king's hospital room.

Torvald sat on his bed with his legs over the side and his stare fixed on the wall. His brow was furrowed and his lips moved from side to side as if he were chewing on something. Or mulling something over.

"My lord?"

His eyes shifted in my direction but he didn't move. "Why would General Halvar want to speak to me the moment I've been discharged from the hospital?"

I did a double take. "I haven't the faintest idea."

"He sent a guard to invite me to lunch. The note said he wanted to be sure I've completely recovered. I told him he was welcome to visit me in the hospital. The guard returned, saying the general had no intention of walking among the sick and injured. He wants something, Asta." His hands clenched in his lap. "What does he want from me?"

I went to stand by his bed, just as puzzled as he was. "I don't know, sire."

"Could he want to convince me to elect the men he nominated for new counselors?" Torvald speculated, as if he hadn't heard me. "He might want to talk about the disastrous end to the island's anniversary celebration, but he was very insistent about seeing me the *moment* I'm released. Could he want to question me about my reasons for halting the Quest for Resources?"

"Sire—"

"I think it's safe to assume my diplomats are dead," he went on hoarsely. "The men my counselors and I interviewed, and so carefully selected to represent us overseas… murdered."

"Torvald." I gripped his shoulder when he didn't look at me. He winced and I immediately released him. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"I'm losing my mind," the king groaned. "It might be that he really only wants to see me well, but the more I think about it, the more suspicious it seems. I've spent too much time around you and your friends."

I pursed my lips to keep from smiling.

He sighed. "But I can't blame you or your men, can I? You've just opened my eyes to the truth about the people around me and the dangers of letting down one's guard. Argh, but I hate this uncertainty!"

"I'm sorry you're distressed, my lord. Is there anything I can do to ease your mind?"

Torvald released the wall from their staring contest and twisted around to look at me. "You can tell me what I should do."

"You're the king. I can't tell you what to do."

He gripped my wrist and leaned forward. "Yes, but we're also friends, aren't we? Please, Asta. I need your help. I'm not thinking clearly. What would you do if you were in my position?"

That was simple; if General Halvar had asked me to join him for lunch the moment I was released from the hospital, I would have refused. It was in my power to refrain from being in his presence when there wasn't an audience, an army, or a god forcing me to be. If

Torvald didn't want to see the general, he shouldn't have to either. He was the king. But if he refused… Up until the meeting with the counselors last week—was it really only last week?—Torvald had never openly defied or disagreed with Halvar. The general had kept his king ignorant and under control. He'd had no need to suspect Torvald could be a threat. It was different now. Torvald forcing an end to the Quest for Resources the way he did, with the public declaration that returning soldiers would be questioned about suspicious conduct overseas—it might as well have been a declaration of war.

I took a deep breath. "You have to go. You have to convince him you're still as naïve and oblivious as he's always thought you to be. If he pushes you about his counselor nominations, say you're still looking into the candidates and then change the subject. If he asks why you decided to end the Quest for Resources so abruptly, tell him you've heard rumors about your diplomats behaving unseemly overseas and would like to know the truth. If he offers you a story that defends your ambassadors, pretend to think on it and say you have to go through with your plans just to be sure.

"Tell him about the band of traitorous Holgarians plotting against you. See how he reacts to this. We'll know if he's in league with them by his reaction. That would ease all of our minds. Ask him about the men. Ask him what his plans are after the Quest for Resources is over and he's allowed to come back to the island for good. Make small talk until the appropriate time has passed and you can leave without insulting him."

Torvald nodded slowly. "It seems that's the most reasonable thing to do."

"Don't worry. I'll go with you."

"You can't," the king murmured. "Halvar specifically asked that I come alone."

"You've never been alone with anyone other than your wife," I said, annoyed by the nerve of Halvar. "An attempt was just recently made on your life! General Halvar can't honestly expect you to eat with him while unaccompanied."

"Do you think he means to kill me during this luncheon?" Torvald asked, wide eyed. "Everyone would know it was him."

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter at this point. All I care about is your safety."

The king released my wrist before collapsing on his side against the pillows. "I'm so tired of this, Asta. I wish it were over."

"As do I, sire. Take heart. It can't last forever." I was trying to convince myself more than him. I couldn't imagine a life without questions, suspicions, and secret plots. That image of the schoolgirl in the tree, watching the sun set, seemed like a made-up fantasy. Could it

have possibly been real at any point in time?

The door swung open behind me, causing Torvald to sit up. I turned to see Viggo striding into the room, chest heaving.

"I went to your room but it was empty," he gasped. "I thought something had happened to you."

"I'm fine," I said, noting the sweat on his brow. "What's happened?"

Viggo smiled, suddenly sheepish. "Nothing. I was just worried about you, but you seem to be recovering well."

"Miraculously well, according to Dr. Ichiro. There's no need to worry."

Viggo nodded, his gaze drifting to the distressed patient. He knitted his brow. "Is the king all right?"

I threw Torvald a quick glance. "Rest, my lord. It won't seem so bleak in the morning." I crept over to Viggo and shooed him out of the room. "He's exhausted," I said once we both stood in the hall. "General Halvar practically demanded they have lunch together the moment he's discharged from the hospital."

"That's odd," Viggo murmured.

"He also wishes I be absent from this meeting."

Viggo's eyebrows rose.

I nodded. "Yes, exactly. I think I should have the nurse give the king a relaxing drug before he drives himself insane with worry and doubt. Our work in the shadows doesn't suit him. It makes me wonder if he'd be better off not knowing the true goings-on of the world around him."

"The truth is always better than lies," Viggo said with a quick shake of the head. "He'll grow accustomed to this eventually. He has to if he's to be a more effective leader."

"I suppose you're right. I do feel for him, though…" I took Viggo's elbow and allowed him to escort me back to my room. "Could you have extra guards stationed around Torvald's home?"

"Of course."

I squeezed his elbow. "Thank you. I'll ask Hemming to check in on the king when the general comes for lunch but I'd rather my fellow Defender have support, just in case."

"I've spoken to Gabor and the rest of Lennart's friends," Viggo said as we neared my room. "I offered them wine laced with truth serum. None of them knew of Lennart's plans to kill the king or if he was involved in the conspiracy. Hemming willingly offered himself to be interrogated. He knew about the truth serum and took it anyway, just to prove he was on our side."

There was a brief moment of relief before the frustration drove it away. I was glad that we had eliminated some suspects, but I was

upset that we hadn't trusted Hemming from the beginning. He would have been a much better partner. Instead, we'd been forced to work with Lennart who most likely alerted our enemies of our every move.

"How's Bryn?"

Viggo frowned. "Still taking exams. I'm tempted to storm into his instructor's office and rescue him. It's been almost four hours. How many questions could he possibly have left to answer?"

"Becoming a doctor is no small feat. They have to know everything if they are to properly treat people."

Viggo pulled the door to my room open. "Yes, I suppose. I can't wait for his schooling to be over. We'll have a ceremonial burning of those damned books."

I grinned. "We'll celebrate with him once his exams are over, but I believe he still has another three years' worth of classes to take before he can be certified."

Viggo groaned. "He's mad! He has to be. How can he stand the prospect of another three years of studying and testing?"

I slid back into my bed. "He loves helping people. It's not a burden to him as it would be to you."

Viggo sat with a sigh. "He's insane. Brilliant and practically a saint, but still insane."

I laughed. "Too true. Has he decided what he's going to do about Raziya?"

"He's to reject her affections, of course," Viggo said. "She's only eighteen."

"I asked what *he* was going to do, not what *you* think he should do."

Viggo wrinkled his nose at me. "With all his studying, there's been little time to talk about women or anything else for that matter. He didn't seem to enjoy dancing with her at the anniversary celebration. I expect he's overwhelmed by her enthusiasm and annoyed by her high-pitched whining." Settling back into his chair, he muttered, "I know I would be."

"Or he's overwhelmed by the prospect of having a woman be so infatuated with him," I said. "I think it's sweet."

Viggo scoffed. "She doesn't know anything about Bryn other than his position on the hill and the fact that he's studying to be a doctor."

I smirked down at my sheets as I flattened the creases over my lap. "What did you know about me in Dotharr's Academy when you fell for me, other than the fact that I was feisty and a quick learner?"

Viggo gave the question due consideration. When I dared to peek at him, he gazed down at the floor, copper eyes lost in memory. "I knew you were strong," he said at last. "I knew that you wouldn't bow under anyone's authority unless they had your respect, and that you

refused to be shamed or demeaned without a fight." He threw me a quick, shy glance. "I knew enough."

"I'm sure my divine beauty had nothing to do with your affections," I teased.

His lips curved. "Oh, you're beautiful also? I hadn't noticed."

I laughed. "So. What am I going to do with you?"

"You could marry me, I suppose," Viggo said with a shrug.

"How romantic," I said with a pout.

His face softened, his eyes smoldering. "Dear Asta, would you marry me?"

I reached for his hand and he gave it. After running my cloth-encased fingers over the calluses on his palm, I pressed my lips to his skin. "I will someday, you rugged, impossible, wonderful man. I'd like a lengthy courtship first."

He cupped my cheek before he kissed me. He was smiling when we parted. "Agreed. Now, are you well enough to sit in on an interrogation?"

"You're ready to bring Lady Helka in for questioning," I assumed.

Viggo nodded. "It's been an appropriate amount of time. I'd rather catch her before she tries to run or does something even more rash. When are you being discharged?"

"Tomorrow, along with the royal couple. I just thought of something; could you stop by the instructor's office in the morning and have Bryn excused from exams so that he can test the king's food before the luncheon with Halvar?" I asked.

Viggo nodded. "Of course. I'm sure Bryn will be glad for the respite."

Chapter Thirty-One

Viggo placed a goblet of wine on the table before Lady Helka. “Again, I apologize for the intrusion. Because of the attack on the king at the anniversary celebration, we’re talking to everyone on the hill who could have seen anything suspicious during the preparations.”

“Yes, I understand,” Lady Helka said tersely. “I already told you I didn’t see anything.”

“We don’t conduct our questioning on people’s doorsteps, ma’am,” Viggo said, folding his hands across the table. “It might prevent someone from being completely honest.”

Lady Helka’s dark eyes fell on the two scribes sitting in the corner of the room. “What is their purpose?”

“They record everything we say so that Master Viggo can study the interrogation at a later date or provide evidence to support a claim,” I said.

Helka huffed at me. “Might I ask what *you* are doing here? You’re the king’s bodyguard, not a member of the security staff.”

Viggo looked surprised. “I’m sorry. I assumed having someone you knew present would ease your discomfort.”

I made to rise from my chair. “I can leave if you—”

“No, please, stay,” Helka said with a forced smile. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll be leaving shortly because, as I said earlier, I didn’t see anything.”

I settled back into my seat. “You’re too quick to answer, my lady. It makes Master Viggo suspicious. Perhaps if you walked us through that day from your perspective, he would be more easily persuaded that you saw nothing of consequence.”

Lady Helka’s nostrils flared as she took in a deep, aggravated breath. She glared at Viggo. “That morning I was at home, eating breakfast with my children. We took a walk, visited with their cousins, and then returned to prepare ourselves for the evening. I hired a hairdresser and a makeup artist to work on me. You can request their verification if you like. I’m sure they’ll gladly testify to my being there. There was also a maid setting out my dress and shoes.”

Viggo carefully pushed the goblet closer to Lady Helka. “Wouldn’t you like—?”

She waved it away without pausing. “Once I was properly dressed, groomed, and painted, I proceeded to help my daughter into her dress and do her hair. Haskell whined about his outfit for at least an hour before I threatened to take away his precious allowance. That promptly ended the whining, and we proceeded to the city’s main square by carriage.” She leaned back in her chair and inspected her

fingernails. “I believe the young man who drove us was called Walid. We arrived at the square approximately ten minutes before the celebration was scheduled to begin. I did my usual rounds, saying hello to everyone and anyone of importance, before I allowed my children to play. I conversed with Bodil for at least an hour, sat with the king and queen for about twenty minutes, talked briefly with General Halvar—”

“What about?” I asked, trying my best not to sound too eager.

Lady Helka tossed her red hair over her shoulder. “The weather, my children, the food being served, his many victories across the sea. Trivial matters.”

“What did the general do once your conversation was finished?” Viggo asked.

“He claimed to be fatigued from the amount of energy packed into the square so he retired to his rooms here on the hill,” Helka said. “Why does it matter?”

“No one else left the square to our knowledge,” I said while Viggo scrambled for an answer. “We’re simply making a note of the general’s absence. Perhaps he saw something on his way to the royal hill that would be of use to our investigation. Please, continue your story.”

Helka shrugged. “There’s nothing else to tell. I danced with two men, I conversed with three others, I found Bodil again, I sat with you for a time, I tracked down my children, we listened to Torvald speak, the arrow was shot, Rakim dropped dead from the apartment, you ran to the stage while screaming at the top of your lungs, and then there was an explosion.”

“You seem to be very fond of your suitors,” Viggo said. “For a woman who claims to have only ever loved King Tatsuo, I’m surprised you can find interest in other men.”

Helka laughed. It wasn’t a pretty sound. She crossed her arms and leaned her elbows on the table. “Tell me something, Master Viggo. In all your time pining for Lady Isa, did you ever feel lonely? Did you ever try to fill the void with the company of another woman, even if that woman was as insignificant to you as a fly?”

“Never,” Viggo said in a heartbeat.

Helka scoffed. “Well, then, you are much stronger than I am.”

“How would Tatsuo feel, do you think, if he could see just how many suitors you’re entertaining?” I asked despite myself. “How would your suitors feel knowing they aren’t the only ones vying for your affections?”

Helka scowled at me. “That’s *King* Tatsuo to you, Isa. I doubt he would care. He would take any woman to his bed in the years after his wife’s death. Every man I entertain has to know I’m not looking for marriage, just company. I express little interest in their personal lives

and ask them to vacate my rooms the moment our… activities are over."

I shuddered.

Helka's severe frown lessened. "Judge me if you must, but not all of us can be so virtuous."

"Did Lennart know you only wanted a physical relationship?" I asked.

Helka smirked. "Do you honestly think he was attracted to my personality?"

Viggo rose to his feet and pushed his chair back; the legs screeched against the floor. "All right. Enough. We know you're much too proud and pathetically attached to King Tatsuo's memory to share your bed with all these men. We know about the secret panel in the southern section of the wall and the Holgarian warriors you have been letting onto the grounds. We know it was these men who assassinated Counselors Odalis, Cade, and Ganix. That makes you their accomplice."

We had no evidence to support this but she didn't know that. We could only hope it would make her nervous enough to make a mistake.

Viggo placed his hands on the tabletop and leaned in. "That makes you a traitor. Do you know what happens to traitors?"

"I imagine they're executed," Helka said with a sniff. "But since I've done none of the things you've stated—"

"We have an eyewitness."

Helka sent me a proud, incredulous look. "I highly doubt that."

"Would you doubt the words of your own son?" I challenged.

Viggo pressed his lips in a firm line. We had agreed to keep Haskell out of this, but Helka didn't appear to be the least bit interested in the wine and I couldn't think of anything else that would persuade her to speak.

Helka faltered, but only for a moment. "You can hardly trust the fickle word of a child. Given enough money or candy, their allegiance will change at a moment's notice."

Viggo produced the metal sheet from his pocket and placed it on the table. "Do you know what this is?"

Lady Helka hardly glanced at it. She took the goblet and carefully swished the wine around. "I assume it's part of a guard's documentation plaque."

"It's a guard's documentation plaque that doesn't shimmer in the light," I snapped. "The only one of its kind on this hill. Any guesses as to how it came to be in our possession?"

Helka brought the goblet to her nose and inhaled sharply. She made a face and turned to Viggo. "What kind of wine is this?"

“Answer Lady Isa’s question,” Viggo said coldly.

“If I’m not mistaken, this particular age of wine is best served chilled and with sharp cheddar cheese cubes,” Helka said, having the gall to be offended. “How dare you serve it otherwise?”

“It was chilled a moment ago,” Viggo practically growled. “You weren’t interested in it then. Why now?”

She spoke as if trying to communicate with a child. “Because I’m thirsty.”

Viggo marched across the small interrogation room to the door. He yanked it open and stuck his head out. “Someone send for ice for Lady Helka’s wine!”

The woman gasped and twisted around in her seat. “You can’t put ice in wine. It ruins the flavor.”

“You’re a traitor!” Viggo said, leveling a scalding look her way. “You deserve to sleep in a mold- and rat-infested cell for a few nights before being executed. You don’t deserve good wine. The only reason I provided the goblet you currently hold is because Lady Isa asked me to.”

A lie, of course, but it made me seem more sympathetic to her situation. That might help us later.

Helka slowly turned back in her seat to look at me. There was suspicion and pride in her eyes and the set of her mouth.

I shrugged. “You bore a king’s children. Despite the evidence against you, I thought you should be treated with *some* courtesy.”

“Thank you,” Helka said with a pointed look over her shoulder. “It’s so nice to hear that at least one person in this room hasn’t forgotten who I am.” She raised the goblet as if toasting to me and then drank.

Finally.

Viggo marched back to his seat. “Would you mind terribly if we returned to our questioning?”

Helka returned the goblet to the table. “I mind very much, but I doubt that will stop you.”

I leaned forward. “What do you know about the group of Dotharr’s anointed who have been trying to kill Torvald?”

“I know enough.” Helka’s eyes widened. She snapped her jaw shut, horror and confusion changing her once-proud face.

Viggo grinned. “Who leads them?”

Helka wrestled against her mouth’s desire to continue speaking. “Tat… su… o.”

“King Tatsuo is sending assassins after Torvald from beyond the grave?” he asked with a snort.

“Tatsuo… still… alive.” Helka was sweating profusely from the effort to stop speaking, but as long as we continued asking questions,

she was strongly compelled to answer.

"Still alive," Viggo and I chorused. "How?"

"Out of… respect… execution… made… private," Helka said, words garbled. "Only king… executioner… eight guards blessed by… Dotharr… present. I persuaded counselors to… let me watch… helped Tatsuo escape."

"Don't fight the serum, Lady Helka. You're going to hurt yourself," I said impatiently. "How did he escape?"

Helka exhaled before her words spilled out. "The execution was arranged to happen in an older market square in the southern section of the island. The area was evacuated the night before. The guards ran a sweep through the neighborhood to make sure it was abandoned, then set up a perimeter around the square. It was a hot day. I brought poisoned refreshments for them. Tatsuo was brought into the square by the executioner, who was accompanied by three other men."

She took a deep breath and continued. "I pretended to be overwhelmed and left before they could secure Tatsuo to the chopping block. I had to think fast. I hadn't planned for three additional men. So I started a fire." Helka wrung her hands. "I-I didn't realize that the materials used to make buildings in the southern section were so… cheap. The entire neighborhood went up in flames like a bale of hay in the summer.

"When I returned to the square, there were fallen beams and flaming vendors' booths and the burnt bodies of the guards littered about. I couldn't find Tatsuo. I searched for an hour, but he was gone. I supposed he had used the distraction to free himself and surprise the men who hadn't been poisoned. He could overpower them if he wasn't bound in chains anymore. I dosed myself in ashes and ran for help, knowing I couldn't be blamed if I were the only eyewitness."

"You should have been questioned," Viggo muttered. "Those circumstances would have sounded awfully suspicious to me."

Helka shook her head. "I told the authorities the fire was started by one of the southern section inhabitants, a drunk who wanted to see the king die. I was just lucky to be alive."

How long did they search for this false culprit before they gave up? I wondered. *How gullible did Master Philo have to be to believe such a tale?*

But it had come from Lady Helka. She was respected on the hill and she had never lied before. Why would she lie about what happened at the square? She was an excellent actress; she had been fooling everyone for years. She must have outperformed herself that day, ranting and crying and being entirely inconsolable.

I glanced at our scribes. "Are you following along?"

They nodded and continued scribbling on their parchment.

"What happened next?" I asked Helka.

She shrugged. “Nothing for many years. His body was never found. There was a glimmer of hope that he had escaped, but I couldn’t know for sure. It drove me mad. Then, about five years ago, I received a letter from Tatsuo. He was alive and well, and he had a plan to avenge himself. He needed my help. I agreed to do whatever he asked, but I had to see him first. He asked me to meet him on the beach near Sippa’s School of Arts. He was changed and horribly disfigured, but very much alive.”

Helka sniffled, eyes downcast in shame. “He thanked me for all my efforts to stop his execution, and told me how he had survived on his own in the southern section of the island until the time had come to strike back. He told me about the secret panel in the wall around the royal hill. He told me about the company that crafted metal sheets similar to the ones used to make guard documentation plaques. He told me how to create false plaques. Then he told me to wait for his message. He promised he would send a helper to protect me in case I was ever discovered.”

“Lennart,” I assumed.

Helka nodded. “Lennart was an excellent liar and thief. He stole the records of Tatsuo’s impeachment and execution, intimidated the counselors who hadn’t been directly involved in Tatsuo’s demise, and fed Torvald lies about the goings-on here at the hill. No one suspected him. Then he gave me a message; it was time to begin crafting plaques.”

“You just let the events unfold,” Viggo said, voice tinted with disgust. “Not only did you help the assassins get rid of the counselors who had dared stand up to that tyrant of a king, but you let Lennart try to kill Torvald.”

“Torvald was never the target,” Helka miserably admitted. “Getting revenge on the counselors was Tatsuo’s main priority. He assumed Lady Isa would blame the king for what happened in Kenshore—”

I stiffened.

“—and kill Torvald. If she didn’t, he would force her to when the time was right.”

“Wait,” Viggo murmured but Helka continued.

“Tatsuo would then reveal to Holger that he was still alive and, with new counselors instated who supported him, he would be voted back into his former position as king.” She wearily waved a hand at me. “Lady Isa proved to be too good of a bodyguard, maybe even a friend, to the king. So Tatsuo decided to send men he had personally trained to get rid of Torvald. Unfortunately, you and Master Viggo caught onto this and began questioning all the hilltop residents. Tatsuo was forced to wait until your investigation became dry and

your suspicions were laid to rest before he could act again."

"Why wait for the anniversary celebration?" Viggo asked. "Why not act during Torvald's wedding?"

"To lull us into a false sense of security," I said before Helka could. "To make the ending of the anniversary celebration that much more memorable. To publicly terrorize and humiliate us."

"To make a statement," Helka murmured. "To prove that Torvald was lying when he told the people that they had nothing to worry about during the last press conference."

"What is he planning on doing now?" Viggo asked. "Where can we find him? Who is he masquerading as?"

"He's tired of patronizing you," Helka said, sick with grief. "It was fun at the beginning but it's become a nuisance. Tatsuo is going to end Torvald's reign himself. You can find him in the king's home. He's having lunch with his son as we speak."

Viggo gripped my arm before I could reach the front door. "Let me go in first. It might be dangerous."

I yanked my arm away. "Now is not the time for chivalry." I threw the door open and ran into the house, almost tripping on the bodies of guards littering the hallway.

There were six dead. Hemming lay across the stairs with a fork in his eye, his mouth gaping open. I swallowed the bile threatening to come up my throat.

"Lisodinae have mercy," Viggo whispered somewhere behind me.

My hands formed fists at my sides. Anger made my blood surge through my body like waves crashing over the shore. I marched down the hallway.

Viggo hurried after me. "We need a plan."

"I *have* a plan. I'm going to kill him!" I reached the dining room's archway only to find Bryn bleeding and groaning on the hardwood floor.

Bryn, who had so carefully tended to the wounds of a stranger on her first day at the academy. Bryn, who had befriended Dotharr's Miracle and given her reasons to smile despite the bleak situation she'd found herself in. Bryn, who had freely offered his assistance to the vengeful warrior determined to kill the general. Bryn, who had taken the time to construct special earplugs for his friend despite all the other things he had been assigned to do. Bryn, who had saved my life more times than I could count—lay dying.

The floor tilted beneath my feet. The air thinned. I tore my gaze away from his blood before I could faint.

Viggo caught sight of Bryn on the floor and stiffened.

"Go to him," I said, fighting for breath.

Viggo ran to his friend and fell to his knees.

The two servants who had been allowed to remain in the king's home were dead. One had a butter knife protruding from his head; the other a fork in her chest. The table had been overturned. There was food, pieces of china, shards of glass, flowers, and silverware scattered before the fireplace. The mirror above the mantelpiece was broken and hanging crookedly on the wall.

Lennart brandished the king's ceremonial sword and was bearing down on Torvald. The king held a silver serving platter before him like a shield and his eyes were wild with panic. General Halvar, or should I say Tatsuo, sat in the only chair that had survived the attack, sipping brandy.

I hastily removed the dagger from my boot. "Lennart!"

The former Defender turned just so that his eyes could meet mine. The sword was still aimed at Torvald's chest.

Tatsuo lowered his cup of brandy and smiled. "Hello, Asta. You're just in time."

At the sound of my name, fear gripped my stomach. The earplugs Bryn had made for me had been lost during the explosion. I had nothing to protect myself with but my own will.

Will you do me a favor? Will you reject any commands the general gives and do everything in your power to destroy him? I couldn't detect a difference in my person. The fear escalated. Why hadn't I listened to Viggo? Why hadn't we come up with a better plan than this?

"Bryn's been skewered with a two-pronged fork. He needs to be taken to the hospital right away." I could see Viggo trembling in rage and panic out of the corner of my eye. He rose and kicked a dining chair out of the way before stalking toward Tatsuo. "If he dies, you worthless bastard—"

"Go," I said. "Get Bryn out of here."

He aimed his murderous glare at me. "I can't just leave you here to fight Tatsuo and Lennart alone!"

Torvald let his shield fall to the ground with a clatter. His face grew chalky white and his mouth hung open. "T-Tatsuo?"

"If Bryn dies, it'll destroy us both." My voice cracked. I swore and pointed my dagger at Lennart. "Don't move!"

He grinned. "My reach is longer than yours, Asta of Kenshore." He extended his sword in Torvald's direction.

The king backed up against the wall, eyes fixed on the blade coming ever nearer.

"The moment it would take you to throw your dagger would be the moment I pierced his heart." Lennart hardly needed his eyes to guide his blade. It stopped just before Torvald's chest.

"Asta," Tatsuo said, drawing my attention. "Will you do me a

favor?"

Ice filled my lungs.

My limbs grew stiff.

I couldn't move. *No!*

"Will you do *me* a favor?" Viggo whispered from the other side of the room.

Tatsuo turned sharply in Viggo's direction, rage and disbelief twisting his already-harsh face into something far more sinister.

Viggo's eyes were fixed on me. The righteous fury brought on by seeing his friend so injured was gone. His face was soft, radiating confidence and love. "Will you believe, once and for all, that you're stronger than him? Will you free yourself from his curse?"

Warmth flooded through my body. The tightness in my lungs magically disappeared. I took a deep greedy breath. Even my posture relaxed.

Was this what it felt like to be free?

A whistle echoed across the dining room, one that drew all our eyes to Lennart. An arrow exploded from his chest, sending blood everywhere. I let out a squeak of surprise, Torvald gasped, and Viggo swore. Tatsuo never took those flaming eyes off of Viggo. Confusion flickered across Lennart's face, and then he collapsed.

Dagmar's harsh voice cut through the room. "On your feet, General Halvar."

Tatsuo rose slowly. My handmaiden stepped out of the servants' entrance and loaded another arrow into her crossbow. She must have snuck up on us while we were all distracted. Pride made a smile pull up the corners of my mouth.

I waved at Viggo. "Go."

He hesitated only a moment before lifting Bryn into his arms.

"Thank you," I added, voice wavering with the power of my gratitude.

Viggo managed a little smile before he dashed out of the room.

Dagmar narrowed her eyes at Tatsuo. "The queen is hiding in your study, my lord. Take her to Master Philo and tell him what's happened here. Do not return unless there is an army behind you."

Torvald slowly ambled across the room, past his father. "Why? After all these years…"

Tatsuo curled his lip at his son. "You're a weak, sentimental fool who isn't even blessed by Dotharr. Our Heavenly Master of Warriors sent me through a trial of fire to aid me in taking back my throne! You're not worthy of commanding me or any of my men. You're not fit to rule Holger."

If heartbreak could be portrayed by an expression, it would be the look on Torvald's face. He stumbled back as if physically weak. He

blinked away tears and breathed heavily through his mouth.

Dagmar took a step forward, brandishing her crossbow. “You shut your mouth! The master is twice the man you’ll ever be!”

“Torvald,” I said. “He’s mad. Don’t listen to him. Find Kalea. She needs you.”

The king nodded distractedly and staggered toward the archway.

Tatsuo gritted his teeth. “Twice the man?” He charged at my handmaiden.

I hurled my dagger. It sank into Tatsuo’s back but he hardly seemed to notice. Dagmar shot an arrow at Tatsuo’s chest, but he twisted out of the way at the last moment. Her eyes widened. She reeled back, fumbling for the quiver.

Tatsuo grabbed Lennart’s fallen sword with an ugly growl. I dashed after him and leapt onto his back. He swung his body, whipping me to the side before I could get a good enough grip around his neck. I flew off of him and hit the wall, then scuttled to my feet in time to see Tatsuo run his sword through my handmaiden’s chest.

“Dagmar!” I yanked the poker and shovel from their hooks by the fireplace, and sprinted to Tatsuo.

He drew his sword out of my handmaiden’s body and spun to face me. I watched her collapse, anger and grief building around my throat.

“*You heartless beast*,” Torvald shouted.

“Don’t,” I barked over my shoulder. “Get out of here—now!”

Tatsuo advanced and struck. I blocked his jab with the poker and hit him across the face with the shovel. He snarled curses and thrust faster. I skirted back to avoid the blade’s swipe at my chest, ducked before it could slice my throat, and swung my arm out of the way before it could pierce my shoulder.

He screamed, making my ears ring and my head ache, as he charged and thrust his sword over his head. I stood my ground and threw my weapons out to meet his, forming an X over my head. The sword hit the dull metal with an awful *clang*. I winced as the sound vibrated through my skull and set my teeth on edge. Tatsuo pressed down on his sword with all his strength, mismatched eyes bulging in rage. Despite my own impossible strength, I struggled to keep him away. My shoes weren’t equipped for battling on the polished wood floor; as he leaned in, I slowly began sliding back. Sweat poured down my face and accumulated along my spine. My arms trembled.

The general grinned. “Will you do me a favor, you worthless little rat? Will you stand down and let me kill you?”

“Will you do *me* a favor?” I grunted. “Shut up.”

Instead of trying to fight his weight bearing down on me, I used it. I dropped onto my bottom, slid between his widely-spread legs,

popped up, and spun around to face him. I swept the room with my gaze. Torvald was gone. I let out a relieved breath. He was safe for now.

Tatsuo straightened, giving me a clear view of the dagger still sticking out of his back, then he pivoted to face me. “Why did I think you would be useful? You had one task: *obey!*”

“I answer to no one now,” I said as I advanced. “You’ve lost.”

“I can still remedy this,” Tatsuo growled. “I can still kill you, kill the royal couple, and send men after your precious friends. I can still blame it all on you!”

I thrust the poker at his face but it was parried; I used the shovel to smack his side. Tatsuo grunted and stepped back. I wouldn’t relent. I swung, anticipating his dodge, and clipped his head with my foot. He stumbled, but shook his head hard and plunged back into the fight.

When I finally managed to knock the sword out of his hands, I thought it would end there. I thrust the poker toward his abdomen, but he dodged at the last moment and grabbed my wrist. Before he could crush it in his meaty fist, I spat in his face. He didn’t let go, but his fingers loosened as he swiped at my saliva with his free hand. I twisted out of his grip and whacked his shoulder with both metal rods.

He fell against the table but had a kick ready when I approached. Stars burst before my eyes and pain erupted across my brow. Blood oozed down my nose. I drew an arm down my face, lightning quick, ready for any surprise blows.

Then I heard it; the sound of a bell being furiously rung somewhere up above. Tatsuo’s crazed eyes narrowed up at the ceiling. He rolled his shoulders and reached behind him to wrench the dagger from his back. It came back bloody, all the way to the hilt.

“What is that?” he growled, tossing the dagger aside.

“That would be the bell that was built into the balcony connected to the king’s room.” I grinned at him. “You have mere moments before every guard on this hill comes running to rescue the king and queen.”

“I will be long gone before then,” Tatsuo said.

“We’ll see.” I jumped to the table, kicked off the edge, and swung both arms down as I descended.

Tatsuo swiped the silver platter off the floor and flung it at me. I deflected it as I landed and he used the distraction to cuff me across the face. I reeled back, blinking furiously. He tugged the shovel out of my grasp and swung it at my head. I rolled, wiping more blood out of my eyes when I was upright again. The general turned sluggishly. I caught sight of the enormous bloodstain on the back of his white uniform.

Hope surged within me. *I must have punctured something vital*.

Tatsuo loped over to the table and lifted it above his head,

muscles bulging under his uniform. With a shout, he hurled it at me.

I threw myself under the table and rolled, coming to a stop on my feet. The table hit the servants' entrance with a sickening *crunch*.

"Asta!" Viggo shouted from somewhere behind the former king.

I took my eyes off Tatsuo for a moment and glanced at the archway. Something heavy hit the side of my head. The world went dark.

* * *

When my eyes opened again, my surroundings were spinning. I blinked hard to clear my vision but it didn't help much. All sound was cut off except for a high-pitched ringing in my ears. My shoulder and jaw ached from my fall.

Viggo knelt beside me, shaking me. "Asta! Are you all right?"

I looked around, slightly groggy. Tatsuo was nowhere to be seen. That helped my head clear instantly. "He's gone!"

"Where? Which way did he run?"

I stood unsteadily. "I-I don't know."

Viggo rose, drawing the sword from the sheath at his belt. "I'll check the front. You check the back. We'll corner him and end this."

We ran. I scooped up the ceremonial sword Tatsuo had left behind and sprinted to the servants' entrance of the dining room. I soared over the table blocking my path with a single bound and almost landed on Dagmar's body. I paused for a moment to look at her still, peaceful face before I gritted my teeth and fled down the servants' corridor. I burst into the kitchen and through the side door, catching a glimpse of the former king's retreating form across the ward. I took a moment to clear my eyes of blood and tears before I chased after him.

He took my family, he took Dagmar, he almost took Bryn.

He won't escape me! It will end here. Now.

Servants scattered at the sight of me. Royal family members gawked and pointed after Tatsuo. I flew past them, sword at my side. I would take off his head! I would plunge the sword through his heart. He couldn't run forever.

"Asta!" I heard Viggo call.

I didn't bother turning. This was my moment.

Tatsuo skidded to a halt at the top of the stone steps separating the upper ward from the lower. I continued with caution, sword at the ready.

Master Philo stood at the foot of the steps, staring grimly up at the former king. Behind him was every guard that had been off duty. I

could tell because they weren't in uniform, but they had their weapons ready. Some hadn't even bothered with shoes or shirts. The king had called, so they had come.

"What is going on here?" Master Philo asked.

"Lady Isa has gone completely mad!" Tatsuo wailed. "She attacked the royal couple, killed every guard surrounding the king's home, and tried to kill me when I intervened."

Master Philo raised his eyebrows at me.

"That's not true," Viggo said, coming to a stop at my side. "I was there. The general ordered Lennart to kill those guards and attack the king. Arrest Halvar!"

"He's Lady Isa's lover," Tatsuo exclaimed. "Of course he's going to defend her."

"The general is lying."

Tatsuo, Viggo, and I spun around. Torvald came to a halt a stone's throw away, chest heaving, sweat dripping from his brow. He thrust his shoulders back, dark eyes fixed on Tatsuo. "If you won't believe them, then believe me, Philo. The general is at fault here."

Master Philo nodded. "Then we will take him into custody, sire."

"Stay where you are." The king glanced at me. "His fate is yours, Asta. Do what you will."

Tatsuo and I locked eyes. Even in his final moments, he showed no fear. Only defiance. I thought of my family, my friends, the servants who cared for me, the land that created me. I thought of the men who had so bravely defended us that day. I thought of the women and children who had been so ruthlessly cut down in the streets. I could almost picture the fires and hear their screams.

I marched toward Tatsuo, gripping the sword with both hands. "Torvald, close your eyes."

With a flick of my arm, the sword sliced through the air. Tatsuo's body hit the grass. His head smacked against the stone steps and rolled down to Master Philo's feet.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Viggo grabbed a fistful of Tatsuo's hair and pulled the head out of the bloody sack. Lady Helka leapt back into the corner of her cell with a horrible scream. Viggo advanced, holding the head out before him.

"Who else was working for Tatsuo?" I asked over Helka's screaming.

"It was Tatsuo all along," Torvald announced to the anxious crowd. "With the help of Lady Helka, he evaded execution and began building a new identity for himself. He procured fake documents, hired false witnesses, and spread rumors about himself in the hopes of being sent overseas on the Quest for Resources. Once he had worked his way into the counselors' hearts, he was elected general. He forced my diplomats to be his prisoners once they reached the mainland and began his glorious, terrible war in secret.

"He used Lennart, my former Defender, and the counselors that remained who were still loyal to him to keep me in the dark. I blame myself. I trusted his word, the false accounts he brought before me every visit, and the men he claimed were ambassadors from the mainland. I supplied the men he needed to build up his army and the vessels he used to travel to our sister nations."

I tore my gaze away from the audience to glance at my king.

Torvald was staring gravely down at his notes, lips pursed. Finally, he raised his head. "I doubted the word of an eyewitness and did the minimal amount of investigative work. I chose to believe in Tatsuo's success and the promise of new supplies. Holger's name will be forever shamed because of his greed and my ignorance." The king cleared his throat. "Thanks to Lady Isa and Master Viggo's efforts, not only has Tatsuo been stopped but his supporters have also been tracked down and imprisoned. Once tried, they will face proper punishment. New counselors have been instated, one of which is my grandfather, Makoa. They, along with my lovely wife, will rule Holger in my absence."

The audience roared with questions and protests.

Torvald raised his hand for silence and the noise was quickly hushed. "I go to the mainland to make amends for mine and my father's mistakes. I go to negotiate peace and offer whatever I can to convince our sister nations that the Quest for Resources is over. I take only my faithful bodyguard and a ship's crew with me. I will make it clear that we Holgarians no longer wish to be known as barbarians, but friends." He took a deep breath. "I will make this right."

"Your Highness?" someone toward the front asked. "Without the

Quest for Resources, what are we going to do about the supply shortage?"

"Where will we emigrate to?" another shouted in the background.

"I won't return until I've made treaties with the mainland that will solve both of those problems," the king promised. "Securing peace must come first. Thank you for your time."

I took his arm and led him off the stage. The other guards created a wall between us and the people as I assisted the king into his carriage.

Bryn stirred. Viggo pushed away from the wall and moved to his friend's bed.

I put my knitting needles and the three rows of stitches aside. "Hello there. How are you feeling?"

Bryn's eyes swept the room and his body before falling on me. "I'm all right. What am I doing here? What happened?"

"You were stabbed with a two-pronged serving fork," Viggo said. "You lost a lot of blood. Dr. Ichiro said you're lucky to be alive."

Bryn grimaced. "That's right. Lennart was in a blood frenzy. I heard the sounds of a scuffle while I was in the kitchen and came out to see what was going on. General Halvar kept the king from escaping while Lennart murdered the servants and any guards who came to investigate. I'd never seen so much death… Poor Torvald was forced to watch." He placed a hand over his chest, eyes hollow. "Then Lennart came for me. I was no match."

"You did the best you could. Just be thankful you're still alive," I said.

Bryn nodded slowly. "Dagmar was having tea with the queen in the upstairs drawing room. Were they able to escape?"

My eyes dropped to the yarn and my throat grew tight.

"What happened?" Bryn asked upon seeing my expression.

"Dagmar is dead," I murmured. "Tatsuo ran her through with his blade because she dared to say that Torvald was the better man."

Bryn cocked his head to the side. "Tatsuo?"

"The general," Viggo said, then he told our friend everything.

Bryn reached for my hand and I gave it. He squeezed my fingers. "I'm sorry, Asta. I know you cared for Dagmar."

I swallowed with difficulty. "Not nearly as much as she cared for me."

"A mother will always love her child more than her child loves her," Bryn said, smiling.

I took in a shuddering breath. "I never told her how much I appreciated her. She was bossy and demanding, but she stayed up with me on those endless nights and she worried about my safety and

reputation all the time and defended me from anyone she thought was the least bit threatening." I was crying too hard to speak then.

Viggo was quick to wrap his arms around me.

"She really was like a second mother, wasn't she? And now she's g-gone!" I sobbed. "It's been so lonely without her. I don't think I'll ever be comfortable in the king's house again."

"There now," Viggo said in his gruff, uncomfortable manner. "She wouldn't want you blubbering like this on her account. She did what she did because she wanted to, not because she expected you to appreciate it. You respected her, took her counsel when you thought it appropriate, and let her fuss over you while you were recovering from the explosion. I think that was enough for her."

I sniveled and nodded into his shoulder, wishing I could believe him.

"Tatsuo's dead." Viggo pulled away to look into my eyes and grin. "Your family and your homeland have been avenged. The mainland is now safe from him forever. Doesn't that make you happy?"

"Yes… and no," I admitted. "My family is still dead. The families that survived his crusade are still scarred and broken. The mainland will never be the same again."

Viggo sighed, abandoning all cheeriness. "Yes, I suppose you're right."

Bryn cleared his throat. "From the sounds of it, Torvald intends on doing everything in his power to make things right. I have faith in him, and so should you."

I nodded, wiping my eyes.

"You're going with him," Bryn said, glancing from one of us to the other. "Aren't you?"

"He would have gone alone, but everyone who cares about him reminded him that he could still be a target," I said. "Sending an army doesn't exactly say, 'We come in peace,' and sending a small militia proved to be too much last time. A one-woman army and her faithful lover sounded just about right."

Viggo snorted at that last part but said nothing.

"How long before you have to go?" Bryn asked.

I grinned. "We leave the moment you're well enough to walk."

Bryn perked up upon hearing this. "I'm to come with you?"

"Of course. The king is going to need a medicine man onboard the ship in case anyone gets hurt."

"But I'm not a doctor yet. I still have three more years of studying before I can be certified. Wouldn't Dr. Ichiro be a better choice?"

I settled back into my chair. "He was the king's first choice, but he's lived his whole life on this hill. Torvald highly doubts Ichiro will want to leave, and he'll only bring someone he trusts. You're his

second choice. Besides, the more skilled warriors the king has at his side when he faces the leaders of our sister nations, the better."

Bryn chuckled. "The three of us *are* a force to be reckoned with." He frowned, suddenly grim. "What became of Gabor and Hemming?"

I sighed. "Hemming was killed by Lennart. Gabor is staying here on the hill to be the queen's personal bodyguard. New Defenders are going to be chosen from Dotharr's Academy ahead of schedule to help him. I've recommended Rainer, Asger, Frode, and Brandt. We're still waiting on the king's decision."

Viggo made a face. "I hate to think what things will be like with Gabor in command."

"He *did* turn out to be trustworthy in the end," I murmured. "Maybe it was just me he was unpleasant to."

"Lennart's influence couldn't have helped," Bryn said. "Perhaps with the two of you gone, he'll turn over a new leaf."

I stood beside the king and watched Lady Helka approach. She wore a flamboyant dress of pink and gold, and had her red curls pinned up. It seemed she had adorned herself with every precious stone she owned. As if looking her best would make this day any better. She walked past the new counselors, the queen, and me with her nose in the air. She paused before Torvald to curl her lip.

"Bow before your king, you selfish ingrate!" Kalea snapped. "If it weren't for his kindness, you would have been escorted off the royal hill and left to fend for yourself the moment he became of ruling age."

Evie let go of Torvald's hand and threw her arms around her mother's knees, letting out a wail of sorrow.

Helka turned her haughty look on Kalea. "Thank you for that, *Lady* Queen. Now you've upset my daughter."

"If you cared about us at all, you wouldn't have done it!" Prince Haskell shouted, the first words he'd said all day. "This is your fault! I hate you!"

Torvald gripped his brother's arm before the boy could bolt down the pier. Haskell twisted his arm this way and that in a desperate attempt to free himself before the tears could overwhelm him.

The king knelt before his brother. "This is the last time you'll ever see your mother, Haskell. Control your temper and kiss her goodbye, or you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

"No." He hastily wiped his face with his forearm and sniffled, gaze averted. "No! I-I don't want to."

"For goodness sake, control yourself," Helka said. "It was *you* who betrayed me. I wouldn't be in this mess if you had kept quiet."

I slapped her across the face, sending her ridiculous jewelry swinging. Her hair flapped to the side and she stumbled, mouth agape.

Evie let out a cry of concern and released her mother. Haskell stopped struggling against Torvald. No one else seemed surprised.

I leaned forward until my nose was a hair away from hers. “You don’t deserve to be a mother. You don’t deserve to be so loved.” I turned to scoop Haskell up in my arms and then marched away from the group. Once out of hearing range, I sat him down on a pier stump. “I’m sorry I struck your mother in front of you. You shouldn’t have seen that, but she’s wrong. You did the right thing by telling us the truth. It was painful and difficult for you, and I admire you so much for it.”

Haskell raised his gloomy eyes to my face. “You do?”

I nodded. “Torvald and the rest of the counselors are safe because of you. You’re right when you say it was your mother’s actions alone that condemned her. *You’re* right, Haskell. Has that ever happened before?”

A ghost of a smile played around the corners of his mouth. “No. She’s always right.”

“Not today,” I said. “Isn’t that something?”

He nodded, but the joy didn’t last. His chin started bobbing and the tears returned. He buried his face in his hands.

I crouched. “I’m sorry you have to go through this, Lord Prince. I can’t imagine how you must be feeling right now, but I need you to be strong for Evie.”

“I can’t believe sh-she’s leaving,” he hiccupped. “I’m so angry at her b-but I don’t want her to go.”

“I know,” I murmured, “but it’s important that you have a proper goodbye. It’s the only way to begin healing. Do you understand what I’m telling you?” I rose when I heard the unmistakable sound of movement over water.

Haskell peeked out from behind his fingers at the ship that would take his mother away. The ship that was casting off. The prince hopped down from the stump and sprinted along the pier. He flew past the group gathered around his sobbing sister and went right up to the retreating ship.

“Mother, I’m sorry,” he shouted, running beside the vessel. “Take care of yourself! Have many adventures. Write to us. Mother?” He came to a stop at the pier’s end, gripping a stump to keep himself from falling into the water. “Mother, I…” The ship continued gliding gracefully away from us.

I moved to stand beside the king.

“I didn’t think he was going to say goodbye,” Torvald said. “She just hugged Evie and left. I would’ve stopped her if I thought—”

“It’s all right,” I said. “She was standing on the poop deck beside the captain. She must have heard him. She chose not to reply.” My

body was tight with anger but my heart ached at the sight of the young prince kneeling at the end of the pier, watching his mother sail away from him.

The king sighed and wilted as if suddenly tired. “Well, that’s that.”

“Don’t worry, princess,” Kalea said, lifting the still-sobbing Evie into her arms. “I’ll take care of you.”

“Careful with that!” Bryn fretted, hurrying alongside a seaman carrying a crate of medicinal herbs onto the ship. “They need to be stored somewhere dry and sunny.”

Viggo snorted from his place by the ratlines. “We’re going to be on a ship for weeks. Good luck finding a spot that meets your standards.”

Bryn gave his friend a disgruntled look and watched the other seamen hauling his equipment on board. He bolted forward when it appeared one of his precious crates was about to be dropped. “For Ishem’s sake, give me that!”

Viggo rolled his eyes but the smile remained.

“I’ll miss you terribly,” Kalea said, looking soulfully into her husband’s eyes. “Write to me daily, I beg of you.”

“I won’t make any promises I can’t keep, but I *will* write to you when I can.” Torvald kissed her. “Take care of the island while I’m gone.”

“I’ll try,” the queen tearfully vowed.

“Is there something you’d like to say to Lady Isa before we go?” the king asked.

Kalea took in a quivering breath before turning to face me. She had been much more emotional since her father’s passing—not that anyone could blame her. Her face, which had once been so quick to smile, was older somehow. Her eyes had lost their sparkle. She had also started wearing dresses of darker shades and opted for wearing her hair down. As if she couldn’t be bothered with fancy up-dos anymore. She left her husband and timidly approached me.

I stiffened and held my breath, almost afraid any sudden moves would make her retreat. I couldn’t remember the last time she’d looked at me, much less walked in my direction.

“I’m sorry,” Kalea whispered, wet lashes fluttering in the breeze. “I’m sorry I blamed you for Father’s death. I know it wasn’t your fault. I suppose I just needed someone to be angry with.”

I nodded. “I understand.”

The queen bit her lip before throwing her arms around me. I gave her a gentle squeeze, heart full.

“You’ll always be my dearest friend,” she said. “Please, keep him

safe and write often."

"I will," I said, and then she released me.

We shared a smile before she turned to Viggo. "You take care of her."

Viggo bowed. "Of course, my lady. Until we meet again."

Kalea gave her husband one last kiss before she hurried down the gangplank and to the pier. The king watched her go with a nostalgic smile. Then he found my eyes. "Could you help Bryn along? The captain wanted to cast off an hour ago."

Viggo and I both hurried to do as the king said. That was another thing that had changed over the past few weeks. Torvald had become more… authoritative. He was far more serious and thoughtful, hardly ever requesting anything so much as commanding it. It made him seem older and more kingly. I knew Tatsuo's crude execution was affecting him, even if he refused to admit it. He said it had been for the greater good, which was true, but Tatsuo had still been his father. He had to feel *something*.

Once the rest of Bryn's things had been loaded onto the ship, the captain and his crew prepared to cast off. Viggo, Bryn, and I tried to stay out of everyone's way by leaning against the wooden paling along the poop deck.

"Are you ready to go back?" Bryn asked while we watched the crew work. "Kenshore is on the way to the capitol city of Ubar, a city we'll definitely have to visit to make peace with that country."

"I don't know," I said. "I suppose I'll have to be ready. I won't slow the king down by asking him to travel around what remains of my hometown." I smiled to ease his mind. "How did your farewell with Raziya go?"

Bryn sighed mournfully. "Not well, I'm afraid. She claims she'll never love another and will wait for me for as long as it takes."

"Why did you have to be so nice?" Viggo said, impatiently brushing the hair out of his eyes.

I elbowed him in the ribs. "Because that's the only way to treat a lady, annoying or otherwise. Behnam did right by her."

"Thank you, Asta," Bryn said, offering a little smile. "I wish that made me feel better."

"Don't worry. She's young and dramatic. She'll find someone else on the island to fancy and forget all about you while you're apart."

Bryn perked up. "You think so?"

"I know so. I was eighteen once." I snapped my fingers. "That reminds me. I wanted to talk to the king about Kenshore." I pushed off the paling and approached Torvald, who stood beside the captain at the helm. "Sire?" I said, tapping him on the shoulder. "A quick word?"

He excused himself and led the way down the steps to the main

deck. Once there, he clasped his hands behind his back and faced the sea, as if pondering a great mystery. “What’s on your mind, Asta?”

“If the leaders of our sister nations refuse to let us keep some of the conquered land for our immigrants, I would like to offer Kenshore.”

The king blinked at me. “How is it in your power to offer me this land?”

It was my turn to face the waters, although the sun’s reflection made my eyes hurt. I addressed the wood beneath my feet instead. “My father was the mayor of Kenshore. As his only living relative, doesn’t that make me heiress?”

“I suppose,” Torvald said carefully. “Unless a distant male relative would like to fight you for the land.”

I smirked. “I doubt they’ll put up much of a fight, my lord.”

The king chuckled. “True… As I understand it, Kenshore was built by the sea.”

“There’s good soil for crops farther inland, and the closest city to the north is a mining colony. Perhaps as Holgarians move in, they can expand and eventually own that city as well. That gives you crops, lumber, coal, and plenty of iron to bring back to the island.”

Torvald considered this before nodding. “It sounds like the perfect location. Are you sure you don’t want to do anything else with the land? For yourself, I mean.”

“I’m sure, sire. The land is Holger’s.”

The king smiled. “Thank you, Asta. It’s an incredible gift.”

“I’m glad to give it to those who truly need it.” I made to leave but paused when he said my name.

“Asta?” Torvald glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, suddenly apprehensive. “Do you think it can be done? Do you think I can redeem Holger?”

It was the first glimpse of uncertainty I’d seen since Tatsuo died. I quickly brushed away my surprise. “If anyone can do it, you can.”

He nodded in thanks. I left him with his thoughts and returned to the poop deck. Bryn was looked slightly greener than he did earlier. Viggo smirked as he supported his friend.

I gasped. “Are you seasick?”

“Of course not!” Bryn said with an indignant frown. “I’m just… unaccustomed to the motion of the sea.”

Viggo laughed. “So am I, but you don’t see me swooning.”

Bryn groaned and wiped the sweat from his clammy forehead. “I think I’d better lie down.”

“Yes, I think that would be wise,” Viggo said before ushering him away.

I watched their progress for a moment before leaning against the

paling. From this vantage point, I could see all of Holger. I remembered when I first laid eyes on it. I remembered thinking it was so foreboding. I laughed softly to myself. *It's just a piece of land floating in the sea*.

Leaning my chin on my fist, I watched the island grow ever smaller and reminisced on all that had happened to me there. I wondered if I would miss it. Behind me came the unmistakable sound of vomit hitting the wooden floor, a chorus of groans followed by Viggo's vehement apology, and then a grunt from Bryn. I did my best to smother my laughter. Yes, perhaps I would miss it, but not very much. Home was wherever those two men were, wherever my king went.

Still, I knew it would be some time before I saw the island again so I kept watching it until I could no longer make out its form. Then I took a deep breath and turned to face what lay ahead.

List of Characters in Alphabetical Order

Alun: The Heavenly Master (or god) of Food. Butchers, bakers, fishermen, and farmers worship him mostly.

Asger: He was chosen by Dotharr to become a warrior. He is one of the young men who befriends Asta in Dotharr's Academy.

Asta: Also known as Lady Isa. She is the daughter of Lord Canute and Lady Aulin of Kenshore, and the first woman and outsider to be blessed by Dotharr.

Aulin: She was Asta and Sylvi's mother and the wife of Lord Canute. She was killed during the attack on Kenshore.

Bara: She is Viggo and Fallon's older sister.

Bode: He is the errand man for the director of Dotharr's Academy.

Bodil: She was one of King Tatsuo's mistresses. She is the mother of Prince Raoul and is married to Lord Polk.

Brandt: He was chosen by Dotharr to become a warrior. He is Asta's grappling partner in Hand-to-Hand Combat class. He is also one of the young men who befriends her in Dotharr's Academy.

Bryn: Also known as Behnam. His father is Director Endre of Dotharr's Academy. He was chosen by Dotharr after he avenged his mother's murder but he always wanted to be a doctor. He escaped from the academy to enroll in medical school shortly after meeting and befriending Asta.

Cade: He is one of King Torvald's counselors.

Canute: He was the mayor of Kenshore. He was also married to Lady Aulin and was the father of Asta and Sylvi. He was killed during the attack on Kenshore.

Dagmar: She is Asta's handmaiden. She also raised King Torvald after his mother died.

Darnell: He is King Torvald's errand man.

Dotharr: The Heavenly Master (or god) of Warriors. Military men, assassins, security guards, and bodyguards worship him mostly.

Endre: He is the Director of Dotharr's Academy and Bryn's father.

Era: She is one of seamstress Thora's daughters.

Evie: She is King Torvald's half sister. She is Lady Helka's daughter and Prince Haskell's little sister.

Fallon: She is Bara and Viggo's youngest sister.

Feng: He is one of King Torvald's counselors.

Fia: She was Bryn's next-door neighbor, who witnessed one of Bryn's most embarrassing moments.

Finley: He is one of King Torvald's personal Defenders. He is the unofficial leader of the team that protects the king. He has a wife and a young daughter.

Fiske: He was a stable boy who worked for Asta's family. He was Asta's friend in Kenshore and was killed during the attack.

Frode: He was chosen by Dotharr to become a warrior. He is Asta's Arithmetic tutor in Dotharr's Academy and one of the young men who befriends her.

Gabor: He is one of King Torvald's Defenders.

Ganix: He is one of King Torvald's counselors.

Gosta: He was one of the warriors blessed by Dotharr who participated in the attack on Kenshore.

Halvar: He is the general of the militia sent with King Torvald's diplomats on the Quest for Resources.

Haskell: He is King Torvald's half brother. He is Lady Helka's son and Princess Evie's older brother.

Helka: She was one of King Tatsuo's mistresses. She is the mother of Prince Haskell and Princess Evie.

Hemming: He is one of King Torvald's Defenders. He has served the king the longest but prefers to let Finley lead the team.

Indria: She is Princess Evie's cousin.

Ichiro: He is the head doctor who works and lives on the royal hill.

Irma: She was Asta's friend before Kenshore was raided. Her whereabouts are unknown.

Ishem: The Heavenly Master (or god) of Science. Doctors and inventors worship him mostly.

Kalea: She is counselor Rakim's daughter and a personal friend of King Torvald, who later marries him.

Kustaav: He was Asta's fiancé before Kenshore was raided. He was killed in the attack.

Lennart: He is one of King Torvald's Defenders.

Lisodinae: The Heavenly Master (or god) of Mortality. She is also known as the Lady of the Dead and watches over the souls that pass.

Mabel: She is Counselor Odalis's daughter and Prince Haskell's crush.

Madden: He is one of King Torvald's counselors.

Makoa: He is King Torvald's maternal grandfather.

Manning: He was one of the warriors assigned to protect Asta while she was in Dotharr's Academy.

Nua: The Heavenly Master (or god) of Holiness. He is considered the Master of all Heavenly Masters. Kings and counselors worship him mostly.

Odalis: He is one of King Torvald's counselors.

Padraig: He is Viggo, Bara, and Fallon's father.

Pekka: He is one of the young men who tried to hurt Asta while she was at Dotharr's Academy.

Pembe: She is the smithy who works and lives on the royal hill.

Philo: He is the guard master who works and lives on the royal hill.

Polk: He is Lady Bodil's husband and Prince Raoul's stepfather.

Rakim: He is Kalea's father and King Torvald's most trusted advisor.

Ragna: She is one of seamstress Thora's daughters.

Rainer: He was chosen by Dotharr to become a warrior. He is in Asta's Battle Strategy class and is one of the young men who befriends her in Dotharr's Academy.

Raoul: He is King Torvald's stepbrother. Lady Bodil is his mother and Lord Polk is his stepfather.

Rumatoa: The Heavenly Master (or god) of Labor. Metal workers, cobblers, leather workers, wood workers, chandlers, and seamstresses worship her mostly.

Raziya: She is a young lady living on the royal hill who rejects Prince Raoul's affections and later tries to enter a relationship with Bryn.

Samir: He is one of the guards who works on the royal hill. He acted as Asta's chauffeur after she graduated from Dotharr's Academy.

Sippa: The Heavenly Master (or god) of Artists. Musicians, sculptors, painters, dancers, actors, jesters, and acrobats worship her mostly.

Sylvi: She was Asta's older sister. She was killed during the attack on Kenshore.

Tarben: He was one of the warriors assigned to protect Asta while she was in Dotharr's Academy.

Tatsuo: He was the former king of Holger, and Torvald's father.

Thora: She is Asta's seamstress, and the mother of Era and Ragna.

Torsten: He was Sylvi's fiance. He was killed during the raid on Kenshore.

Torvald: He is the king of Holger and the older half brother of Prince Raoul, Prince Haskell, and Princess Evie.

Viggo: Also known as Alby. He assisted Bryn in the quest to avenge his mother and received copper eyes as a result. He has been Bryn's friend since they were children, and graduated from Dotharr's Academy on the same day as Asta.

Vuseth: The Heavenly Master (or god) of Intellect. Engineers, architects, bankers, teachers, lawyers, and judges worship him mostly.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Becca Fox was that strange girl in high school who always seemed to have her nose in a book. She didn't talk much because, more often than not, she was daydreaming about the different worlds in her books. Instead of doodling on the corners of her notes, she wrote scenes for her works in progress while the teacher lectured. She preferred quiet weekends at home with family or with Netflix over parties and large crowds.

Becca talks a bit more now, but not much else has changed. She still enjoys reading, writing, daydreaming, and watching TV, although, she's gotten a lot better at socializing… over Twitter.

She lives in Phoenix, Arizona with her husband, a fat orange tabby cat, and a forever-puppy.

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OTHER BOOKS BY BECCA FOX

IN THE DARK

Released: January 2018
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